GTMA 2020 Travel Writer Award

Entry #066

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Article 1

(No Title Submitted)

Stop. Be quiet. Listen to the voices of the jungle. It's not silent beneath the lush, perpetual blanket that smothers the Congo Basin. The hollows burbling like air sacs below its canopies aren't empty. When the forest floor no longer crunches underfoot, when my breathing has slowed and my heartbeat has subsided and the chatter inside my head has abated, this is what I hear: an ear-splitting symphony discharged by the jungle's inhabitants. Buzzing, warbling, droning, cackling, squawking, whistling, clicking, barking, howling. The sounds echo off the underside of the canopy, bounce off rubber-thick leaves, seep through impassable thickets. Underscoring this mangled refrain is a slow, persistent hiss. It slips through the forest like a fever.

From high above, I can see the fringes of this watershed spreading like a rash across west equatorial Africa. This is the world's second-largest rainforest (after the Amazon), a largely intact wilderness straddling six countries and draining its run-off into the distant Gulf of Guinea. Below me is the most scarcely populated country south of the Sahara – the Republic of Congo, a former French colony frequently mistaken for its mightier and more menacing neighbour, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Most of this country's scant populace has sunk southwards, settling in the metropolises of Brazzaville, Pointe-Noire and Dolisie, leaving the northerly reaches of rainforest largely unpeopled. The capital spreads out beneath me now in gentle waves, corrugated roofs glinting in the sunlight, banana groves embroidering the hillsides, crops plugging the earth's depressions. The Congo River snakes thick and ropey along Brazzaville's southern boundary; on the opposite bank, Kinshasa – capital of the DRC – is a mirage trembling in the haze.

Less than two hours later I'm descending into Odzala-Kokoua National Park, lodged like a beating heart inside this monumental greenbelt. The rainforest oozes from one horizon to the other; it is

fragmented sporadically by twisting tributaries and luminous bais, or salt marshes, and pockets of moulted grassland. Long tarnished in the eyes of outsiders by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Herge's *Tintin*, Ebola outbreaks and that most unfortunate conflation with the neighbouring DRC, this otherwise glorious wilderness has remained largely unexplored by tourists.

Odzala-Kokoua National Park was declared a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 1977, and is home to one of the world's last strongholds of critically endangered western lowland gorillas. They coexist – inharmoniously, at times – with the Pygmy and Bantu people, whose villages are scattered around the park's yawning perimeter. It's here that Spanish primatologist Dr Magda Bermejo and her husband German Illera began their pioneering research into these apes – slighter cousins of central-east Africa's mountain gorillas – two decades ago. Interlopers in a region far from the meddling crowd, they discovered that the gorillas (along with other species) were prized as bush meat, and their numbers were rapidly dwindling. Then in the early 2000s a huge number of their population – about 5000 – died in two successive Ebola outbreaks. Instead of abandoning their research project, Bermejo and Illera have remained at Odzala, encouraging local communities – caretakers of one of the world's most immaculate landscapes – to value gorillas not only for their critical role in the ecosystem but for their untapped tourism potential.

Their collective efforts have been boosted in recent years by new investors keen to see Odzala thrive. In 2010, park management was assumed by the Odzala Foundation, a partnership between the not-for-profit African Parks and the Congolese government. Working closely with communities to counteract poaching and rehabilitate the habitat, their programs are already yielding benefits: multiplying wildlife populations, increasing tourism and the consequent flow of sustainable income to locals.

The lack of tourism infrastructure, meanwhile, was addressed by the Congo Conservation Company, an initiative of German businesswoman and philanthropist Sabine Plattner. Two new camps were constructed in the park, and an existing camp refurbished. Communities were engaged through the benefactor's charitable organisation, Sabine Plattner Africa Charities (SPAC). Tourists started trickling in. Africa's lungs were expanding with the breath of new life.

The road to Ngaga Camp from Odzala's Mboko airstrip is a river of mud. It was freshly graded last week, guide Alon Cassidy tells me, and subsequent rains have turned it to slop. He machetes branches off a tree, jacks up the Landcruiser, wedges the logs beneath its tyres.

"The Congo Basin is not the place to find rocks," he says, beating the branches into place. "It's been colonised and re-colonised with detritus. Its nutrients are poor due to run-off and leaching – the first three feet of soil are rich, the rest isn't."

The forest arcs above us like a wave, spills into the road, swamps us oppressively. It's hard to believe this city of trees has been constructed on such weak foundations. We've passed through a swatch of savannah on our way here, waited for a forest buffalo to remove its wallowing bulk from rainwater pooled in the dirt road, observed a dung beetle burying its load, seen the shadows of moustached monkeys darting through the trees.

Now the forest is still except for that inexorable hissing and the cacophonous zinging of bees. They congregate on our skin, lapping up sweat summoned by the equatorial humidity. If gorilla eyes are watching us from behind dreadlocked vines, we'd never know it. Cassidy revs the motor, drops the clutch. The wheels spin, grip and – yes – propel us through the morass.

Ngaga Camp is a scattering of huts tucked treehouse-like into dense forest in the Ndzehi concession near the village of Mbomo, just beyond the park's south-west boundary. It occupies the overlapping home ranges of several groups of gorillas; among them are those habituated by Bermejo and Illera: Jupiter and Neptuno, named for their respective silverback alphas.

Early next morning, we follow tracker Zepherin Okoko as he tunnels deep into the forest. Up a steep rise we go, down into a gully, across a translucent stream, over logs impregnated with white fungi quivering like fluff, past regiments of Matabele ants returning from battle, the bodies of termites held aloft in their jaws. There's no other visible sign of life here save the silhouette of a tiny sunbird; yet the forest moans at our every move.

Okoko stops abruptly, jabs his hand at the sky. He's detected Jupiter's group feeding nearby. We pull masks over our mouths (gorillas are highly susceptible to human-borne respiratory diseases) and fly nets over our faces to deter the stingless sweat bees enticed by gorilla-scent and the beads of perspiration pebbling our faces. Through oceans of marantaceae we wade, their leaves whining against our incursion. We skirt impassable undergrowth, duck beneath vines and inhale the gorilla-scent that is unmistakably primal. And then, suddenly, there it is, manifesting before us like a phantom: a juvenile gorilla lazing in the crook of a tree, stuffing leaves in his mouth, looking directly at me.

My heart thunders against my ribs; my breath condenses clammy inside the flynet; the forest's melody evaporates into the airless gloom. A pool of green light cocoons the gorilla like an aura, distilling this moment into a hallucinatory dream. An hour later, when our allotted time is over and we've retreated downhill from the group – now swelled to several individuals who swing from trees and discard bitten fruit as their leader, Jupiter, lords over them from the upper canopy – Okoko smiles at my elation.

"Every day I go out to see the gorillas, and when tourists come in I work a little bit harder to find them," Alon translates from Okoko's French. "If the visitors don't have a good sighting, I feel a bit bad about it. We aren't really that OK with it, if the sighting's not great."

Gorillas aren't the only charming residents of this biosphere. They cohabit with spotted hyena and chimpanzees, sitatunga and bongo, forest elephants and 1000 species of bird. To better view some of these creatures, we must cross back over the park's boundary, travel through the buffer zone in which villagers are still permitted to plant their crops, and burrow through the rainforest until we reach the Lekoli River.

The clamour and murk of the jungle dissolves out on the water; my senses are clarified here, the shadows rinsed off with sunlight. I catch the warble of an African grey parrot as we float downriver in our kayaks, smell the pungent, trailing sprigs of the rauvolfia caffra tree, hear the alarmed trumpeting of a forest elephant as it beholds us from the depths ahead. Smaller than its savannah cousin, yet at

the same acute risk of poaching, the elephant flaps its ears, raises its trunk and emits another infuriated proclamation. Then it wades ashore and slips into the forest's protective embrace.

We ease our kayaks into a tributary diverging from the Lekoli River towards Lango Bai and step into the knee-high inlet. It feels dangerous, submerging my feet in a Congolese waterway; yet this is one of the few places in Africa where streams and marshes can be explored on foot, for the only crocodiles here are harmless dwarf species, and irate hippopotami aren't likely to be awaiting us in the channels (they generally confine themselves to deeper waters).

The sky is a purple-gold mosaic with storm clouds and dying sunrays as we approach the bai. Animals walk for hours to sip from this mineral-rich font, Cassidy says. Water buffaloes throng it like barflies, greedily slurping its waters. Birds suck its goodness from the mud. Elephants dig holes in the swamp bed, dispersing deposits with a blast from their trunks and imbibing the nourishing beverage. On busy days, guests can observe this unruly feast from the deck at Lango Camp, which projects discreetly from a fringing forest and is elevated to allow elephants to pass beneath it on their way to the party.

The elephants are bickering out on the bai before dawn next morning. They've resolved their differences and vanished into the forest by the time African Parks eco-monitor Dieudonne Bocka leads me out into the clearing. Few people have a more intimate relationship with this wilderness than he, for he's lived in it – and off it – his whole life.

Before Odzala was turned over to conservation, the forests were used by villagers as a source of food and minerals; Bocka's parents and grandparents would extract salts from Lango Bai. But for the past 22 years the forest has provided his livelihood in a new and more sustainable way, as he shares his knowledge with the conservationists trying to preserve it.

At the far end of the bai, African green pigeons are swooping for mud like a squadron of jets, the air thunderous with their comings and goings. We pass from the bai into an adjacent thicket; unlike the towering foliage of Ngaga, the trees here are stunted, their canopy impervious to sunlight, the floor scant with undergrowth. The forest closes over us like a coffin.

We crunch along its tunnels, crossing carpets of mauve wenge petals, passing an assassin bug camouflaged in its victim's liquefied carcass, stepping over fallen caloncoba fruit, its spiny carapace peeled with ease by dexterous monkey fingers. We loop through crackling savannah punctuated with termite mounds and come finally to the edge of a swamp whose shallows are an abstract swirl of elephant tracks.

Wading into the muddied depths, we drag our boots over unseen debris. Water inches towards our waists. Walls of vegetation surge beside us. Bocka moves slowly, alert to the voices of the jungle. Gradually the depths slope into shallows, and we arise unharmed from the quagmire. No-one has seen us but the water monitor sunning itself on a rock, the jumping spider springing from a leaf, the flycatcher chirruping its sweet call. By tomorrow our footprints will be gone, erased by the creatures wading in behind us, colonised and re-colonised by their inexorable tracks until our own are nothing but a rumour.

Article 2

(No Title Submitted)

I can hear the Arctic exhaling. Breath flows from it in a long, melodic lament. It pops and fizzes deep inside ice floes, fissuring their innards until they slowly pull apart. I can see the Arctic exhaling, too. Breath freckles the tundra beneath pools of melted ice – a blanket slowly unpicked as one by one the bubbles detach from their mooring and float to the water's surface. They hover momentarily, then – pop! – break open and dissolve on the air.

Summer has arrived, and the top of the world is glowing. The sun won't set until September. Light bounces off the snow-streaked peaks and glacial valleys of Spitsbergen – the largest island in the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard. Enfolded somewhere in this whiteout are the fabled creatures we've come to see.

"You have to really scout to earn the right to see wildlife," cautions David Berg, Expedition Leader on Lindblad Expedition's *National Geographic Explorer*.

"Finding a needle in a haystack is easy compared to finding wildlife in this huge archipelago, and in a habitat of ice."

But this place has already contradicted him, for as we set sail from Svalbard's port of Longyearbyen yesterday we noticed white nubs bobbing on the fjord. They weren't nuggets of ice but beluga whales, a pod of five or more breaking the dark surface in what appeared to be a thrilling send-off. Last night, after I'd been rocked into a sleep so tranquilising nothing could shake me from it, passengers more vigilant than me had been alerted by megaphone to the presence of humpback whales.

Now we're cruising into the mouth of Bellsund fjord on Spitsbergen's west coast, peering through binoculars and willing a polar bear to walk into the frame. But this landscape gives away nothing except for the dimpling of water where a fulmar floats, her gut heaving as she produces oil with which to spray her foes, and the flash of black against blue sky – a barnacle goose in rapid-fire flight.

An islet has appeared like a blockage in the neck of the fjord; "Halt!" it seems to say. Anchoring just shy of it, we take zodiacs to a bay named Varsol Bukta – "Sunshine bay," Berg says, "a promising name."

And indeed, the perspective from onshore is vibrant and rousing; it animates a landscape which had appeared, from the ship's deck, to be one-dimensional and toneless, a black-and-white slideshow of water and rock. Standing now within these folds of land, I see clearly a pebbled shore giving way to tundra mottled gold with shrubby sunburst lichen; tundra slopes up towards basaltic rubble and

morphs into a luminescent green cliff-face nourished by a waterfall of guano. Above us, thousands of little auks beat their wings – proud, it seems, of their horticultural achievement.

Stooping, I notice specimens laid out on the ground as though curated for exhibition: tufts of reindeer fur; bleached antlers; savaged bones; driftwood washed up from Siberia (there are no trees on the tundra); and a garland of kelp marooned onshore, its suffocated anchor root flailing at the sky.

“The biggest forest in the Arctic is underwater,” says undersea specialist Maya Santangelo, cradling the kelp in her hand.

“Things that photosynthesise in the ocean provide half the oxygen we breathe.”

The ocean’s exhalations are invisible, but its relentlessly rising temperature is evidenced by the dearth of sea ice in this fjord. Though framed by a row of glacier-oozing valleys, the ocean adjoining its shores is liquescent; it shimmers beneath a sparkling sky.

“We are on our way towards an ice-free Arctic sometime this century,” says Robert Jacobel, former Principal Investigator with the US Antarctic Research Program and guest speaker on-board the *NG Explorer*.

The melting has begotten melting: as the reflective swathe concealing these waters turns dark, it absorbs solar energy and liquefies further still. Even the Global Seed Vault – a subterranean facility in Longyearbyen where millions of frozen seeds are safeguarded against global calamity – isn’t immune from threat: in 2016 meltwater seeped into the vault’s entrance tunnel; mercifully, no seeds were lost. As for glaciers, Jacobel says, they’re stagnating or receding everywhere in the world except for a tiny pocket in the western Himalayas.

“If you want to see a glacier, if you want your kids to see a glacier, go now,” he exhorts.

Chastened, we scan the valleys for more glaciers, visualise the inexorable thaw of the permafrost undergirding this landscape, will slabs of sea ice to manifest before us so that we might see polar bears skating along them.

“You need suitable ice for females to survive after winter,” explains Lindblad Expeditions naturalist Carl Erik Kilander.

“If there’s no sea ice outside the female’s denning area after she gives birth, she won’t be able to find food.”

We’re in search of the sea ice forecast by weather charts early next morning as we sail into Storfjoden, but the anticipated smashing of it against the ship’s hull is curiously absent. We might as well be in the Mediterranean, so unblemished is the sea. But our persistence pays off, for late afternoon we spy a dark smudge moving across a ribbon of ice strung out in the shadow of a mountain: a polar bear marching resolutely from bay to bay, scouting for ringed seals and their newborn pups. Though barely discernible to the naked eye, his presence is reassuring: there is life after all amid this foreboding whiteout.

It takes the promise of further such sightings to animate passengers aboard the *NG Explorer*, for it's too easy to sink into the library's deep chairs and lose ourselves in tales of epic Arctic expeditions as the world we're reading about glides by. There's always a sumptuous meal to be eaten in the dining room, an afternoon tea set out in the bistro, cocktails being mixed in the bar. We could cocoon ourselves for days inside this warm capsule as it slices through the freeze.

But Berg's exhortations to fasten our eyes to the landscape grows ever urgent, for deep inside the channel we find substantial ice at last, glossy chunks drifting like vessels, brash ice turning water to slush, sheets stretched like plate-glass between the bays. Next day we alight on the island of Edgeoya to find a perfect polar bear paw print, yawning in its circumference. Nearby, a herd of obstreperous walruses jostles for space, their formlessness delineated by protruding tusks and whiskers sharp as nails.

They're an omen, for that afternoon two polar bears appear like a prophecy: a mother striding along the shore-fast ice, her cub gambolling behind her. He's the picture of innocence, diving playfully into the frigid pools strung out along the ice, shaking himself off in a glittering spray, galloping to catch up with his impatient mother, lifting his snout inquisitively as Captain Aaron Wood dexterously manoeuvres the *NG Explorer* through this frozen obstacle course towards the ice rim. We watch through binoculars until we can no longer feel our fingers; the sun sinks into our line of sight, turning the ice sheet into an impasto of white-and-silver and dissolving the polar bears until they're little more than a euphoric memory.

The sun is flaring across the archipelago next morning as we take the zodiacs to the forsaken shores of Russebukta, where Arctic reindeer graze on moss and an Arctic fox – his winter white coat moulting to summer's grey – springs across pools of meltwater in search of eggs. He's come to the right place, for birds have congregated here, king eiders and red phalaropes and ever-present kittiwakes, their snowy wingtips dipped in black ink.

Rivers of ice-melt are flowing across the tundra here, carving a path into the volcanic beach and emptying into the fjord. In return, the ocean has regurgitated evidence of yet another catastrophe: plastic, washed in on the gyre. Scattered among the empty whelk egg sacs and the polished driftwood are tangles of fishing rope, remnants of plastic containers, the unidentifiable remains of objects long-discarded.

The globe is no more than a village, its borders porous, its breath encompassing, its oceans circulating like blood between far-distant continents. This certainty is never more potent than at this moment, as I stand on a remote and uninhabited beach at the top of the world surveying humanity's shameful detritus.

Article 3

(No Title Submitted)

Siberia’s cold is unfathomable. It wraps its savage fingers around my neck and crushes the tips of my fingers. It grates my lungs with every razor-sharp intake of breath. It freezes my brain so that I can no longer comprehend what the Old Believer is saying: his black cassock is rigid with cold, his beard a cascade of icicles, his words a warm spill promptly vaporised on the chilled air. What on earth possessed us to come to this most infamous of outposts, this far-flung emptiness where people have been sent to die – or to live, improbably – and in this least humane of seasons?

Nine days – and more than five-thousand kilometres – earlier, we’re oblivious to what awaits us as we bathe in the weak sunshine that’s broken briefly through a snow shower and is casting long shadows and buttery columns along a charming Moscow prospect. The temperature is a mere minus four degrees Celsius – a veritable summer compared to the frozen perdition we will face down the line.

Still, the cold here is impressive. We snap-chill a bottle of wine in the snow that’s powdering our hotel windowsill. We blink away whirling snowflakes and wrap scarves around our tender noses while queuing to see Lenin’s corpse lying waxy and wan and warmer-than-the-living in his sombre mausoleum. As we walk back from a supermarket one evening, I slip on black ice and am hauled to my feet by two men even as I am falling, even as the contents of my shopping bag are rolling downhill.

“Spasibo!” I cry out in response – thank-you – and they nod nonchalantly. They are well-practiced in the rescue of random ice-trippers, these men.

What *are* we doing here, in the darkest depths of a Russian winter? Attending to priorities: it’s my birthday in early January (a significant one), and to celebrate I’m taking the train from Moscow to Vladivostok. What a pity I wasn’t born in June.

I’m joined in my arctic wanderings by 10 family members – an audacious gang of parents, young adult children and a couple of brave boyfriends (the cold is the least of their worries, I imagine). Swaddled gamely against the extremes, they lug small libraries with which to occupy their minds on this interminable journey, and mental fortitude with which to face off against the infernal cold.

At midnight we board the train at Moscow’s Yaroslavskiy Railway Station, stopping just long enough in the bitter freeze to acknowledge the monument marking the starting point of the fabled Trans-Siberian railway. The route arcs in a broad south-westerly sweep, traversing 9,288km and seven time zones before terminating in Russia’s Far Eastern naval garrison, Vladivostok. It is the longest railway line in the world.

The Ural Mountains are cloaked in darkness when we pull into Yekaterinburg in the early hours of the morning. For 33 hours we’ve peered out from our compact, four-berth compartments at the uncoiling landscape, at fluorescent cities dimming into canvasses of black ink; at forests glittering with diamond snowflakes; at swathes of farmland gradually solidifying into cities then disintegrating again

into empty fields of snow. Overzealous heating has shielded us from an ever-changing climate; we step off the train into an incomprehensible minus eighteen degrees.

It is New Year's Eve. Yekaterinburg is lit up like a carnival, the Iset River is a boulevard of ice. The Gosudarstvennyy Akademicheskiy Theatre stands like a baroque wedding cake on a bed of snow; inside, we queue at the coat racks where patrons throw off heavy swaddling to reveal glamorous frocks forced into hiding by the cold. We join them in jubilantly bravo-ing a performance of The Nutcracker, a Christmas spectacle manifesting onstage in vivid counterpoint to the frosted scenes outside. "Zazdaróvye!" we cry at midnight, farewelling the old year with shots of vodka and welcoming the new with flutes of champagne.

Yekaterinburg is a city of death and rebirth, of constructivist architecture built on the foundations of the Bolshevik Revolution and the execution of the Romanovs here in 1918. Though writers passing through on their way to Siberia recalled an unpleasantly industrialised settlement, Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky was deeply impressed by the spirit and ideas of the people, says local guide Olga Taranenko.

"They decided to destroy everything that reminded them of the old regime, and construct a new city."

But the new has been replaced with the old: churches have been re-consecrated and the once-reviled Romanovs – Tsar Nicholas II, his wife and five children – canonised. A cathedral stands on the site where the family died, its red granite walls "reminding us of the bloody events," Taranenko says. Even their once-secret burial site outside the city is now sanctified, a cluster of buildings comprising a monastery dedicated to the Romanov saints. Their remains were removed from here and interred in St Petersburg in 1998.

It takes 63 hours to reach Ulan-Ude, capital of the autonomous Republic of Buryatia. We sail from Europe into Asia, crossing oceans of snow, passing railway stations licked with bright paint and fitted with neon signs alerting us to the temperature: minus 22 at Omsk, minus 20 at Barabinsk where we emerge from the train's swelter into a cold so strident it cleanses our stale bodies and shocks us awake. We buy pierogi stuffed with cabbage and potato at a platform kiosk and watch as a railroad engineer crawls beneath the train, lies upon the snow-caked tracks and fiddles imperturbably with the frozen undercarriage.

Somewhere near Novosibirsk four men appear in our compartment doorway and sing us a song. They're from Perm, and are on their way to Lake Baikal to ice-skate. We applaud their cheerful ditty, though we've understood not a single word.

"You write about Baikal?" asks one of them, spying my notebook. I nod; he punches the air with his fist. Baikal you will love, he says; thank-you for visiting in its most beautiful season.

On the second day of this leg I awake to flooding, late-morning light. I've missed the Yenisei River and an endlessly evolving landscape. We're fast-forwarding through time, gaining hours as we race away from the sun. Our group sprawls across several compartments, locked in games of chess, trapped inside books, embroiled in conversations or hypnotised by the Siberia scrolling by through ice-rimed

windows. At mealtimes, the youngsters squeeze into the parents' compartment for makeshift feasts we've cobbled from shops and stalls along the way: bread and cheese and salami, instant mash, caviar sold by platform hawkers for a handful of rubles.

On the third day, I wake before dawn. We've halted in Irkutsk; I climb from the train into an ethereal gloom. The train recedes along the tracks, its outermost carriages erased by the silvered fog. It's minus 36 degrees, and today I turn 50. Never have I've felt so cold, nor so joyfully alive.

All day long the train crawls along the south-eastern edge of Lake Baikal. The water sloshes sluggishly, turns gradually to slush and then to solid ice as we curve northwards along the lake's eastern shoreline. Opposite it, fields slope into gullies, snowy whitecaps ripple the plains, fog cushions the tree-line like some mammoth exhalation. We see runnels protruding like ribcages from beneath thin coatings of ice; buckwheat might still be farmed here, says our guide Ksenia Martynova, though after the collapse of the Soviet Union many of Siberia's farms fell into ruin, too.

Lake Baikal is the low-point of our journey; the temperatures plumb those unfathomable depths, tearing the breath from our lungs and freezing the blood in our veins. It's the high point of our journey, too, for this place is so otherworldly, so far beyond our imaginings, it stuns us into wakefulness and renewed gratitude for the world. So extraordinary is this shared experience, it will bind our family forever.

We disembark at Buryatia's capital Ulan-Ude, a city that embodies the great collision between Europe and Asia, Russia and Mongolia, Christian Orthodoxy and Buddhism. Stray dogs wag their tails, oblivious to cold, it seems; residents stride along streets wreathed with glacial condensation.

"The real Siberian is not the person who doesn't feel the cold," says local guide Goldan Lenkhoboev, "it's the person who dresses properly for it."

Our own polar-wear has served us well until now, but the cold seeps into our marrow in the village of Tarbagatay, where Fr Aleksei shows us around the ethnography museum he's curated. It's a flimsy, unheated space filled with artefacts belonging to Old Believers – Orthodox Christians who were exiled or fled from European Russia in the 17th century in the wake of church reforms, and whose way of life has changed little since then. The cold here is so piercing I can barely focus; it's a visceral reminder of the conditions into which Fr Aleksei's people – and so many others – were once cruelly banished.

We've seen not a single tourist on our journey so far, and now we have the whole of Sukhaya village to ourselves – except for the young Russian men doing burnouts in their Ladas on the ice-slicked shores of Lake Baikal. This fabled body of water – the world's deepest lake and the largest freshwater lake by volume – extends beyond the village in a brumous mass. It has put up a valiant fight against the deep freeze: waves heave and buck and petrify midair. The ice splinters beneath our boots, and when we skate on it next day we notice air bubbles and waterlilies trapped beneath its surface.

On Orthodox Christmas Eve, January 6, we drip sweat inside the banya (traditional sauna) at our guesthouse, submit to Martynova's birch whips – said to improve lymphatic flow – then run outside and smother ourselves in snow. Finally, we're learning to embrace the cold.

It’s another 62 hours from Ulan-Ude to Vladivostok. The frostbitten landscape flicks past our windows like a slideshow. It’s inconceivable, from within the confines of this overheated compartment, that the conditions unspooling outside might kill us if we immersed ourselves in them unprotected; the snow-draped fields are beaches of silica, the larch trees jaunty filigrees against a blue sky. Young marines bound for the naval city run for the train, their breath puffs of smoke on the chill air; the temperature is slowly rising: minus 20, minus 15, minus ten, the neon signs say. A cook comes around sporadically with freshly made pierogis; we lie in wait and clear her tray in exchange for a few rubles.

At Khabarovsk the railway doglegs southwards. We will the train to slow down, but at dawn it pulls into Vladivostok. This is a revelation of a city, we will discover, a place of bright skylines and frozen bays, striking harbours and exceptional restaurants. But we’re not yet ready to greet it. We linger on the platform – pleasantly bracing at just minus eight degrees – and pose for a photo beside the monument marking the end of our epic journey. We’ve travelled 9,288km – a full third of the world’s circumferential span. And there’s not one of us who wouldn’t climb back on that train before it returns to Moscow, and do it all over again.