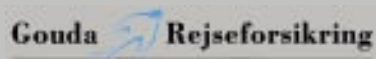


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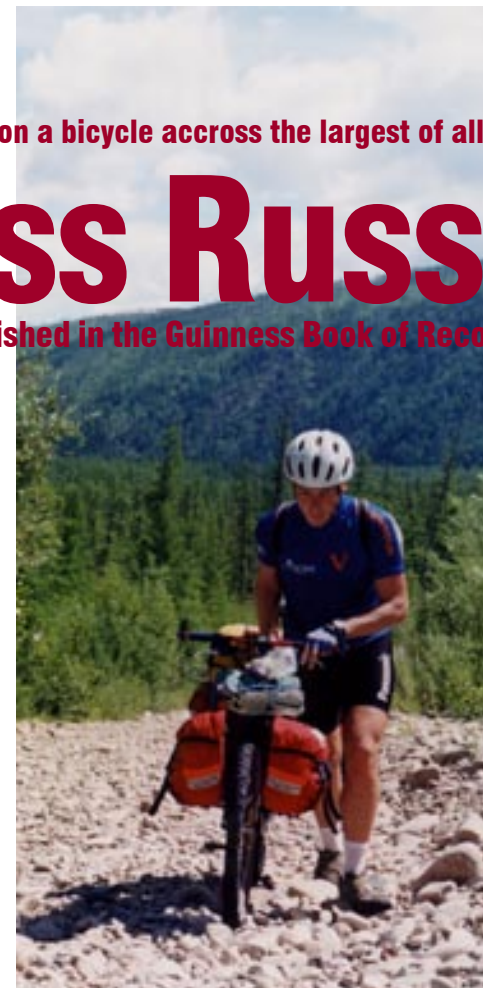
**Thank you to my  
friends, hosts & helpers:**

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Areal trekking equipment and tourist club  
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Søndagsavisen  
TV2/Lorry  
Tomtor public school, Yakutia/Ojmyakon  
Mayor of Perm, Sergey Trutnev  
Vechernij Krasnoyarsk (newspaper)  
--- and many more ...

The first expedition ever on a bicycle across the largest of all countries

# Across Russia

Done in 1997 and published in the Guinness Book of Records 1999



Two Danes tried in 1997 to become the first ever to cross Russia from the extreme East to the extreme West. The starting point was Magadan, which is the most Eastern town with a road, though "road" is a very positive name for this trek! - One completed.

Ice. Only ice. We were staring out of the aircraft window. Ice as far as we could see. The weather was crystal clear and we were still at full hight. This was insane. It was the 2nd of May 1997, and the Magadan region was still frozen. This was the worst possible start on our attempt to become the first ever to cross all of Russia on bicycles. For me, this was the second attempt after a faliure in 1996. Would it fail again?

## Through the White Hell

Nowhere during the period of Stalin, were the mortality rates higher than in the camps of Kolyma in the Magadan region. Here is always windy and temperatures as low as minus 60°C are not unusual. A poem of the prisoners is as follows:

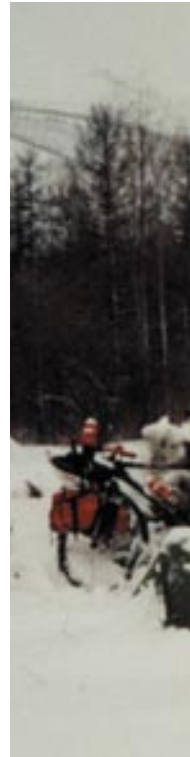
*Kolyma - a wonderful planet,  
12 months of winter and the rest  
One long summer.*

Considering the hundreds of thousands of victims, it is difficult to talk about hardship. But crossing the mountain ranges in Kolyma was exhausting us. Strong wind and minus 16°C with inadequate clothing was at stages directly irresponsible. All the time we were freezing. One day we reached the very limits of our endurance, but found shelter just in time.

No doubt. This was hard . . . and fantastic. The white scenery was nothing less than breathtaking. Dangerous but so attractive that I gave myself a promise: I will be back with the right equipment, and then I will cross this area during the real winter!

The region may be hostile. High rate of crime, deserted villages, poverty, horrible roads and hotels of a standard difficult to explain. But all this doesn't matter. We were hoptalized by teachers, went hunting with a former head of the local KGB, drank vodka with the police and much more. We were always aware that this is the region with the highest crime rate in all of Russia, but in spite of this, we felt welcome everywhere. I have no doubt that this is the part of Russia I like the best.

Much worse was our increasing delay according to



*In Ojmyakon the Centre of Cold, we were invited for the last day of school. Such memories will never disappear, and this is my main reason for traveling: To meet people and nature.*

## Triumph and emptiness

To reach Kaleningrad was very strange. This was the triumph of my lifetime. Nothing will ever compare with this. I was also very honoured that the gouverner of Kaleningrad greeted and congratulated me on the quay in the harbour. But I did also have this overwhelming feeling of emptiness: My expedition was finished and so was the highlight of my life. I had no new goals to strive for and no idea about what to do when I was home. How strange it may sound, the truth is that I felt almost more sorry than happy.

My record has been accepted by the Guinness Book of Records 1999 (publish in the Danish edition). I am the first ever to cross all of Russia with a bicycle. The route was 11.724 km and I did about 13.500 km on my bike.

I have realized that the record was not my main objective. The main thing is my love of the Eastern parts of Russia, and no record in any book can make me as happy as when I heard that the Mayor of Moscow, called me “the most famous Dane in Russia”. When the country I love, recognizes my achivement, this is the best possible acknowledgement I can get!

My next expedition will be even more challenging. I will go on foot from the Magadan Region to the Chukti Sea. Continue East to the Strait of Bering and end at the South at Anadyr, the capital of Chukotka.

My main objective is to see and describe the unusual nature and people of this area with the hardest climate in all of Russia. If I run out of time, I will shorten my distance on foot. But I *should* have the time I need. Two full years starting from the 1st of October 1999.

Jens Alstrup, April 1999.



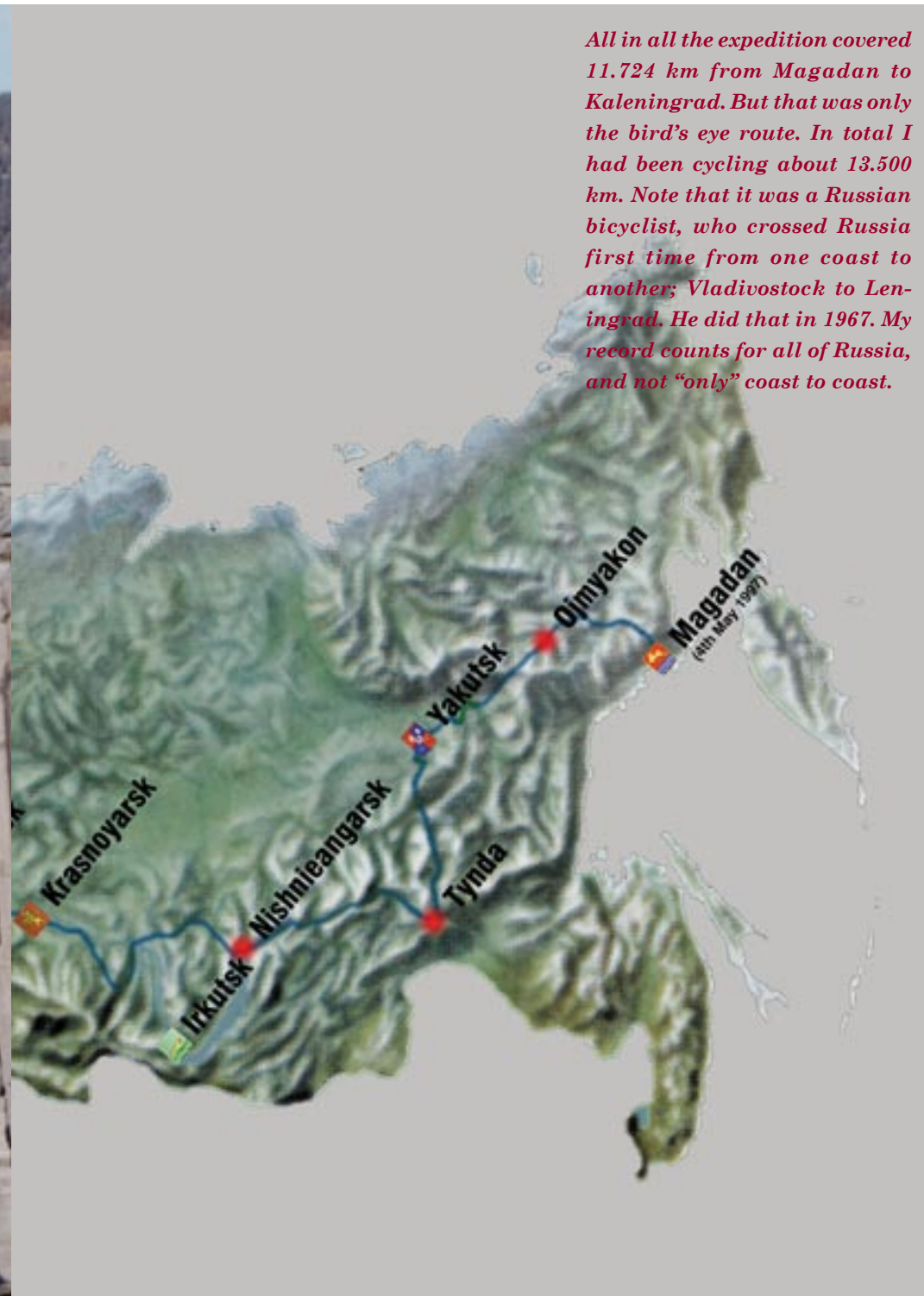
our schedule. We used much more than double the time we had for this distance. Finally we got through the Magadan Region to the “Moskovskii Trakt” the road connecting Magadan with Yakutsk, on the 1st of June.

*The Magadan region better known by the name Kolyma (a part of the Magadan region), is known for the death camps from Stalin's period, and the horrible climate. But even here snow storms are unusual during May!*

## Local celebration

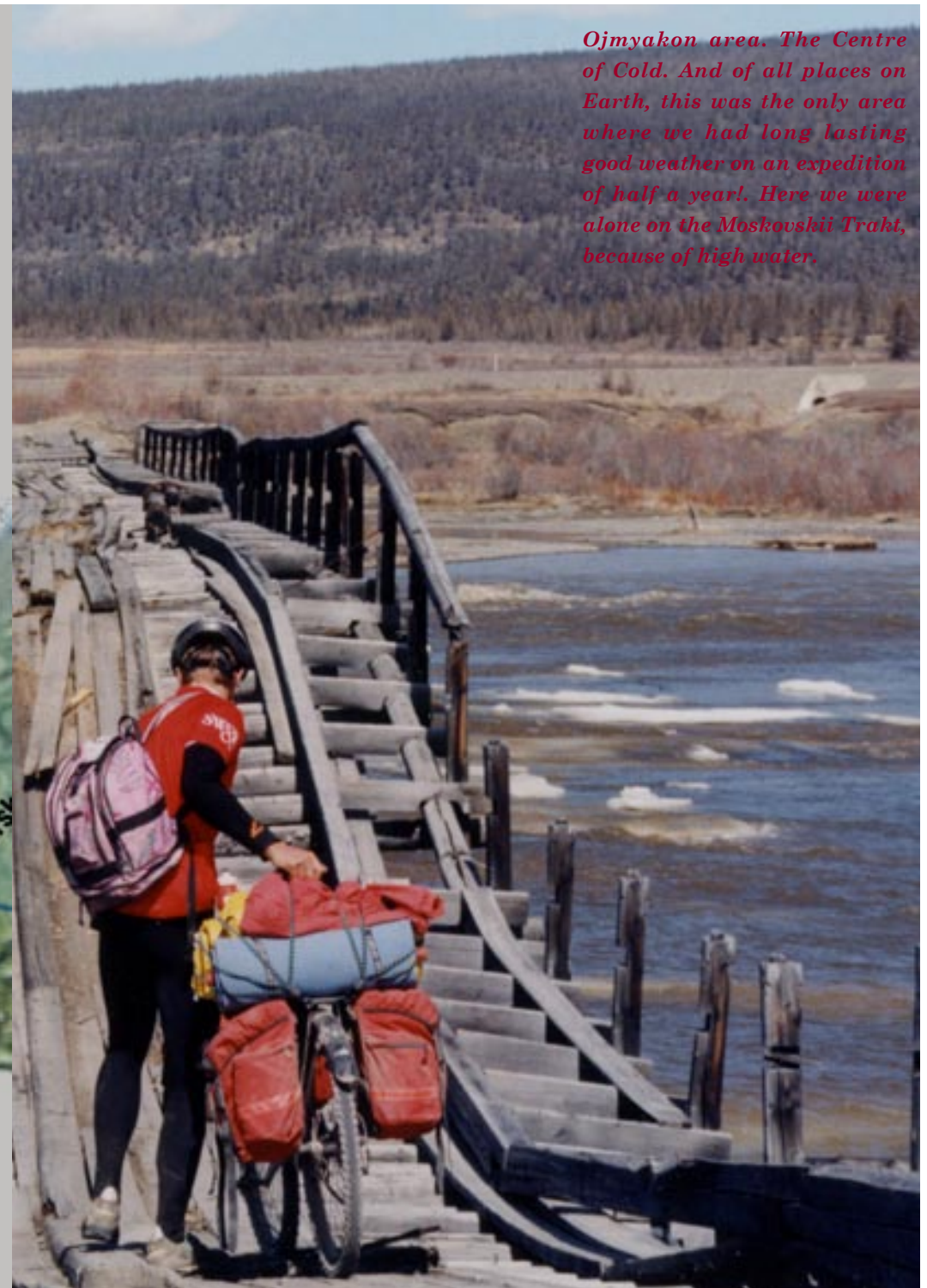
The weather cleared. Of all places in Russia, we got one week of good weather in Ojmyakon, the Centre of Cold in the World.

During the summer Ojmyakon is a hell with billions of mosquitoes. People familiar with Central Siberia and Northern Scandinavia, think they know what I am talking about. They do not. This is in a category of its own. During the winter temperatures can drop down to minus 72°C, and during the summer as high as plus 40°C!. Only two weeks of spring and two weeks of autumn the



*All in all the expedition covered 11.724 km from Magadan to Kaleningrad. But that was only the bird's eye route. In total I had been cycling about 13.500 km. Note that it was a Russian bicyclist, who crossed Russia first time from one coast to another; Vladivostock to Len- ingrad. He did that in 1967. My record counts for all of Russia, and not "only" coast to coast.*

# Across Russia 1997



*Ojmyakon area. The Centre of Cold. And of all places on Earth, this was the only area where we had long lasting good weather on an expedition of half a year! Here we were alone on the Moskovskii Trakt, because of high water.*

area is tolerable. Unlike the first attempt in 1996, we were lucky to be here during just that nice season.

In Ojmyakon we were invited to participate in the celebration of the last day of school. Most of the children, including some of the Russians, wore Yakutic national costumes.

The celebration is a miniature of “The day of the horses” in Yakutsk, and there are competitions and prizes. Dancing, singing, running and most popular of all in Yakutia: Wrestling. For each winner, the children got a Lego Milky Way pack with chocolate and a toy.

## A State within Russia

Yakutia is gigantic. Five times the size of France, and Yakutia is only a province!. The Yakutic people are the only larger population in all of Siberia, who have maintained both their traditions and majority. Other idignious people have either become a minority in their land, or have been russified by technology and education or earlier, also by killings and destructions perpetrated by the first Imperial adventures or Stalin. The killings ended with Stalin, but the Russification lasted all the way up to President Gorbatjov, who ended it.

The Yakutic only resisted when they had a real chance. At the first Russian attempt to conquer their land, they won their battle against the Imperial forces. But the Yakutic knew that new forces would come back tenfold the original number. So instead of continuing the fight, they made a very favorable negotiation with the Tsar, putting them in control of trade of fur. The price was that they had to give up independence and to pay some for this period, very low tribute.

Under the Stalin period they wisely kept away from interfering in politics, and during the Great Fatherland War, they proved to be brilliant and much feared soldiers against the Germans. Large memorials show that they paid a high prize.

Finally in 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed, Yakutia’s local President Nikolayev, declared the independent Republic Sakha, the original Yakutic name for Yakutia. He also made arrangements with Moscow, avoid-



still bad. The wind was against me. And everywhere I saw something of interest, I did not have the time to stop. But I could keep my promise to all of those, family, friends and sponsors, who had helped me. I would make the record!

I was run down by a car in Skt. Petersburg. My visa was cancelled by mistake on the border to Letvia. There was snow storm on the way to Kaleningrad. But I became more and more happy. The successful end of a project started four years earlier was near. I did this with the help of a lot of people. But I also remembered that it was I, who pedalled my bicycle, and no one had done this before me. Even famous Russian travellers had tried and failed earlier. This made me feel proud.

*In Perm I was invited to visit the Mayor Sergei Trutnev. After the visit I came to the Tjaikovskii Theater, where I saw the Tjaikovskii ballet “Sleeping Beauty”.*

is with joy. Also the nature is marvelous. Clear water, roaring rivers, endless taiga, deer, hermelin and if we had problems, the help was there. Parts on my bicycle was welded and I got a new rack made of Russian Iron instead of Western alloy. It was ugly and heavy, but it worked and I was grateful!

## Days of dissatisfaction

At Lake Baikal my friend Claus did not want to continue. Our troubles seemed endless. Just after we separated, he became ill and had to go back home to Denmark by plane.

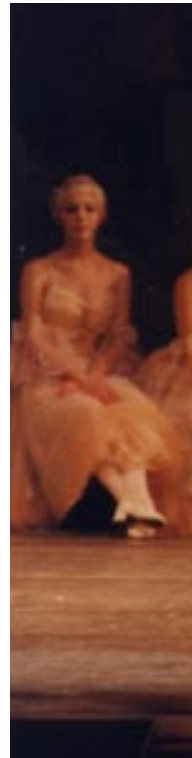
I continued alone, but it was without any pleasure. Everything seemed hopeless and I was sure I would fail. Not even the Baikal Mountains could cheer me up, in spite of the beauty. I felt that there was no hope what ever to reach the Baltic coast before the next winter. The record was lost!

The first week gave me further trouble. Rain and bad roads all the time. But also a lot of people helping me. At the end of August, four months after the start in Magadan, I finally left the BAM and came into the civilized part of Siberia.

## My turning point

Central Siberia gave me much needed positive experiences. At no time did I feel lonely. Everywhere people were friendly and often I met people I knew from 1996. Slowly I caught up on some of the delay. The bad weather continued, but on asphalt it could not stop me, or even delay me. Sure, 7.000 km through rain on a highway is something one cannot be happy about, but all the other experiences compensated fully for the bad weather. In Novosibirsk I had gained so much time that I thought I at least had some chance of succeeding. That surely improved my humour!

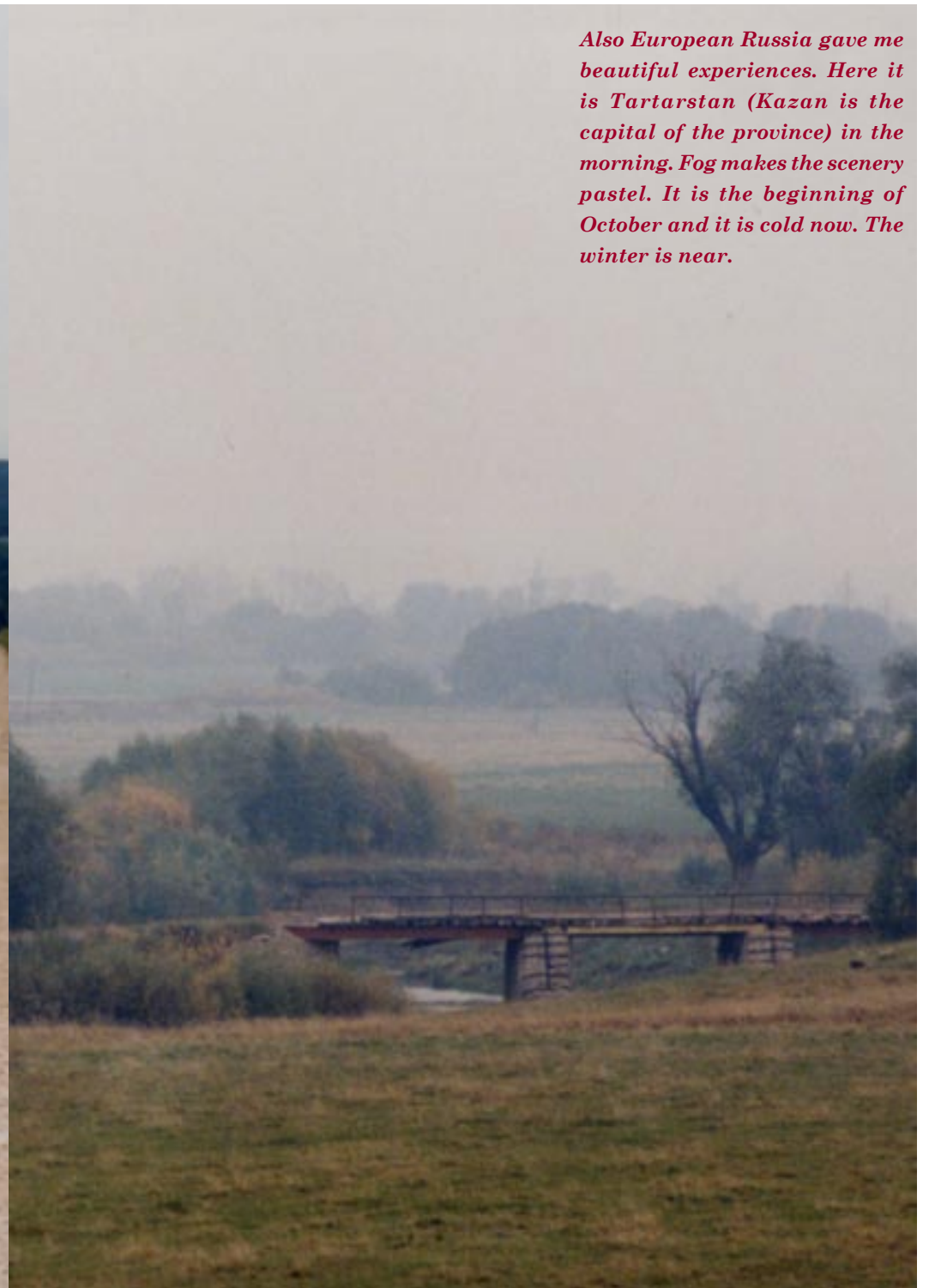
In the Ural mountains I had caught up so much distance, that now I was *sure*. If the bicycle did not break down, then I really could make it!. The weather was



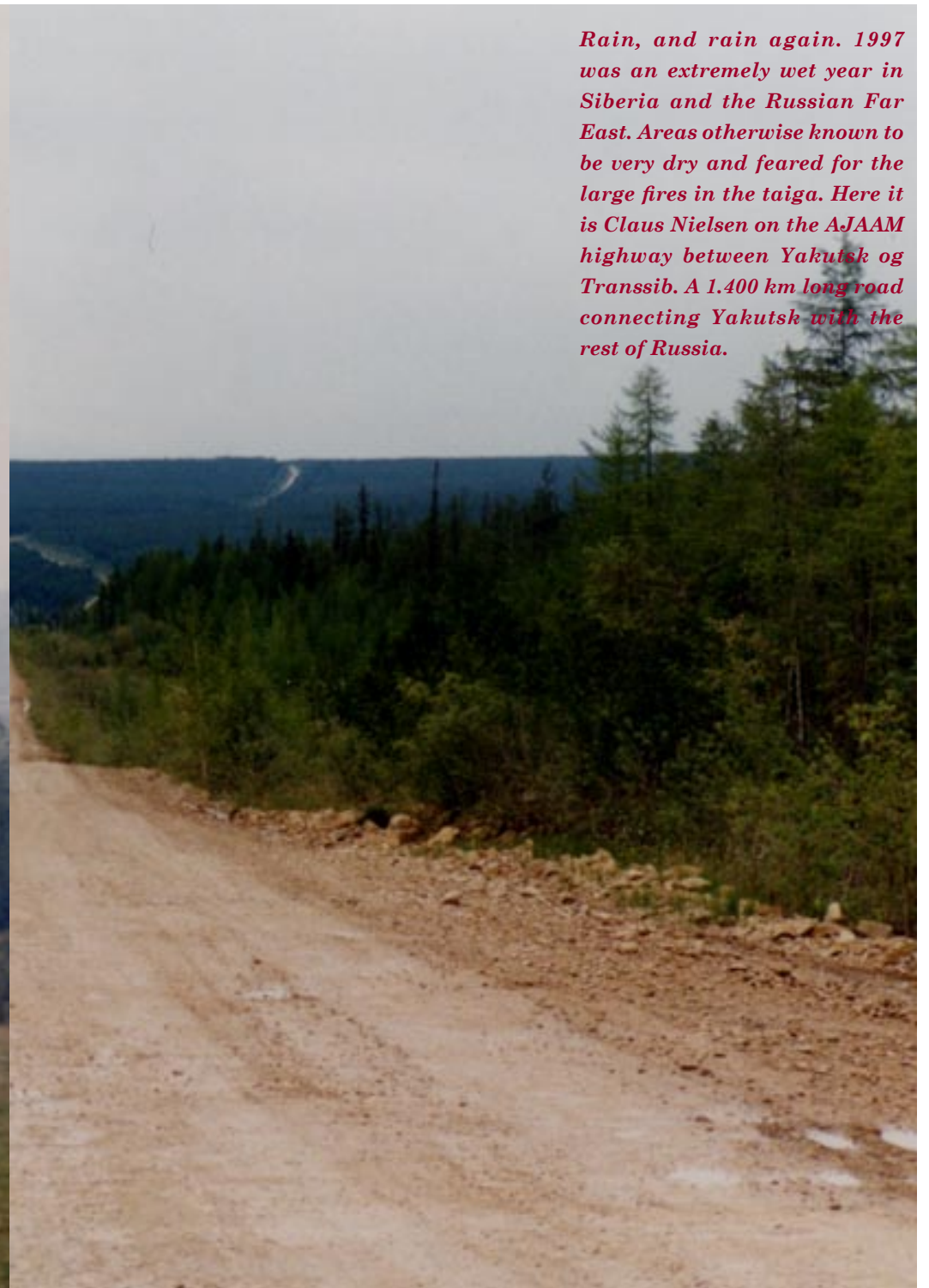
*At the BAM line we got the worst weather. At the beginning the track literally disappeared in the floodings and we had to stop for more than a week. Only two days out of a month we got sunshine. Here we cross the Olekma river, one of the two sunny days. This is Siberia when it is the best!*



*Also European Russia gave me beautiful experiences. Here it is Tartarstan (Kazan is the capital of the province) in the morning. Fog makes the scenery pastel. It is the beginning of October and it is cold now. The winter is near.*







*Rain, and rain again. 1997 was an extremely wet year in Siberia and the Russian Far East. Areas otherwise known to be very dry and feared for the large fires in the taiga. Here it is Claus Nielsen on the AJAAM highway between Yakutsk og Transsib. A 1.400 km long road connecting Yakutsk with the rest of Russia.*

ing full independence. This limited the conflict between the province and the Motherland. However, the Yakutia home rule is real, and they managed to take full control of most of their resources and all of the administration.

## Roads disappearing

During 1997 Europe had a wonderful dry, warm and sunny summer. In Siberia where the climate usually is extremely stable and very dry, we got rain in quantities never seen before. Also the temperatures were low. The only positive effect was that we had fewer mosquitoes. Because of the weather few if any of the locals, thought we could make the record. Especially before we entered the BAM area, where no official roads exist over a distance of 1.800 km. A fact that few are aware of. Russia is not connected by road from the East to the West.

The BAM is the Baikal Amurskaya Magistrale railway going North of Lake Baikal, crossing Eastern Siberia 500 to 1.000 km North of the Trans Siberian Rail, and ending near the Sakhalin Island at Sovietskaya Galvin. This track was an old dream from the late period of Imperial Russia. Construction was initiated by Stalin and discontinued during the war. The plan was to open up for the vast resources: Coal, gold, copper, uranium and much more.

Krushchov did not believe in the project and closed it down. Only small parts were completed. In 1974 Brezhnev thought different. He stated that "The economic future of the Soviet Union is closely connect with the BAM". In a sense he was right, as the BAM took so many resources that it was one of several major reasons for the collapse of the Soviet economy. The railroad was completed in 1991.

The construction is impressive. It is the biggest construction of any type in the world. The Trans Siberian is longer, but measured in bridges, tons of excavations and so on, the BAM is much bigger. However, no one needs this rail. To build it was a brilliant technological achievement, but economically it is a disaster. Brezhnev



had forgotten to calculate the enormous costs of mining in this cold area.

We followed the BAM. Sometimes we were literally bicycling on the railroad, and sometimes we used the old track, from which the rail was constructed. Again we were delayed. Rain, rain and rain again. One day the road disappeared in the masses of water in front of us, and so did a full day's willage. This was a real natural catastrophe, and we were in the very middle of it.

It was weakening our morale. It wore us out physically. Our bicycles were having a hard time too. Our delay increased and increased all the time. The record we had promised our selves and our sponsors seemed impossible. To go back home to admit the failure, felt as impossible as making the record. As we arrived at the Lake Baikal, we were seven weeks behind our schedule.

Sure, not everything was a misery. We received so much hospitality and made so many friendships, that it was worth it all. When I think of the BAM today, it

*Siberia is usually very warm and very dry during the summer. In Tynda is only rains 200 mm a year. We got more than that in a single day and it continued for one full week. Sure, 1997 gave us a very bad summer! Here the road between Tynda and Khorogochi has disappeared.*