

Western Norway and Russia

Cold Lands, Warm Hearts



The ocean crossing from the Scottish Highlands to Norway has taken 22 hours. Waiting for the okay to progress ashore, I sit astride my BMW GS on the ferry's worn polished deck and do my best to ignore the cold, gnawing wind. My thoughts drift back to countless warm evenings over the past three years, nights that Lisa and I had spent in preparation, excitedly devouring the contents of hundreds of different maps, books and travel guides in the planning of our around-the-world motorcycle adventure.

Text and Photography: Simon and Lisa Thomas

We would exist on the road, track and jungle path, carrying only what we needed to live and explore. We sold all we owned in the UK, swapped our cozy house for a tent, and dive-bombed into the diverse pool of life. We're on our way to riding all seven continents, from the most northerly point to the most southerly on each. In the process, 122 different countries will become 'home' for a short while. Our imaginations, roving the next ridge beyond the horizon, will keep us on the move.

Ahead of us in the land of the Vikings and the Midnight Sun: 1,700 miles of one of the most rugged coastlines in the world. With ice-age glaciers and ancient fjords to be traversed, pushing deeper into the frozen Arctic, our first goal is Nordkapp, the northernmost point in Europe, only 1,100 miles from the North Pole.

The rumbling growl of the ship's hull, straining against its moorings, snaps me back to the present, and with engines humming, we launch ourselves from the ferry's mouth. This is it. Our dreams have aligned with reality! Let the adventure begin.

Ride underway, we snake our over ice-capped mountains and plummet into deep, stunning valleys. Black walls of granite, many millennia in the making, tower beside us, and glacier-fed cascades fall near the road from unseen pools high above.

Into the Arctic

Four days' ride north and just five hours from the Arctic Circle, we crawl out, grumble under our breaths as we once again stuff our wet and ice-burdened tent into its compression sack. The steam of our breath is lit by an unexpected dart of early-morning sunshine.



Norway has us under its spell. We've swapped the thick pine-forested valleys for the windswept bleakness of snow-covered plains. In the barren Salfjellet plateau, the temperatures drop to -11 degrees Fahrenheit, and thick snowfall makes visibility difficult, the riding treacherous.

In the car park of the Arctic Circle Center, we kick down the side stands of our bikes and comically peel ourselves free. A gaggle of tourists tumble from their heated coach and, with a few fingers pointing in our direction, begin discussing the sanity of two frozen bikers. It's Lisa's 41st birthday, and one to remember as we play tourist, standing astride the Arctic's line of demarcation at exactly 66° 33' N.

We push on, and in the afternoon with six hours of riding already under our belts, we pull into the Statoil station outside the small village of Lyngseidet (pop. 821), as much for gas as for the chance to warm up. "You are too cold, no?" asks Anna-Sigrid Lofstrom in broken English. A young woman of 20, with a brilliant shock of red hair and a warm, open face, she quizzes us about our

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journey, wondering why in particular we chose to ride so far north. Expressing support and enthusiasm for our endeavor, Anna insists on paying for the chocolate bars that Lisa and I are clutching. We gratefully accept and thank her profusely. This is generosity in its simplest form and given purely for the thrill of participating in some way.

The Most Northerly Town in the World

As we push even farther north, signs of other vehicles and life vanish. Snow that had been threatening all day is coming down full force, thick and heavy, and visibility is again an issue. Clumsy with numbness, we rely on the hope that our feet can snag the gear changer and take 4th or 5th. The stabbing cold makes concentrating imperative, and it demands every ounce of our energy just to stay upright. We have to stop every 40 minutes to break off the icicles forming around our switchgear and cuddle up by the scalding cylinder heads to draw what little comfort we can from the engines' warmth. The bitter wind cuts our faces, but the thrill of the raw experience outweighs the physical discomfort.



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We are relieved to pass a simple sign reading 41K (24 miles) to Hammerfest, the most northerly town in the world. Neat lines of ochre and off-white modern buildings make up the heart of this town, nestled perfectly in a crescent bay. The building-block design of the town is the utilitarian solution for fending off the battering elements of wind and snow.

Inside a spartan but brightly lit supermarket there, the selection of exotic vegetables, fruits, oils and spices, all arrayed like delicious prizes, is astonishing. The small meat counter offers up dark reindeer meat, to which we have now become accustomed. Five full shelves are stuffed from floor to ceiling with jars of pickled, smoked and fermented herring. Coupled with dark rye bread and potatoes, it has been a staple of the Nordic diet for over 5,000 years, and locals jokingly refer to it as "the two-eyed steak."

We reluctantly exit, returning to the bitter Arctic air. Our bikes feel very heavy, too, as we make our way up the loose gravel single-lane track that

slowly curves right. The paint is peeling off the cheap wooden sign, but the letters can still be read: Camping Storvannet. Huddled under the awning of our canvas home, we sit crossed-legged, sipping on strong freshly brewed coffee, savoring the heat from the mugs and warming our hands over the camp stove. Down below, the lights of the town sparkle; but this far north, night won't come for another six months.

Riding to the World's End

The next day, as the morning turns into afternoon, we find a rhythm and I reflect on our position. We are now almost 300 miles north of the Arctic Circle. We ride on, the snow on either side becoming bluer and harder as the temperature drops. Our excitement is tangible; we are just 60 miles from Nordkapp. Even our bodies are slowly becoming accustomed to 24 hours of constant daylight.

Heading for bleak, treeless Magerøya Isle, where Nordkapp sits, we are chilled as much by the descent into one of the world's deepest undersea tunnels (4.5 miles long and 700 feet deep) as we are by the heavy one-way toll of \$21 – each! Midnight has struck.

Beams of gentle yellow light force themselves between a dark cloud base as we pose triumphantly for photos at the Nordkapp monument, just a few feet from the thousand-foot vertical drop off at the World's End. Only the sea and sky are ahead and beyond that, unseen, the Arctic Ice Shelf.

Six miles outside of Kirkness, at the end of route 886, the large blue sign simply reads, "Norwegian – Russian Border, Restricted Area – 500 meters." And with a bit of trepidation and deep breathing Lisa and I go for it, riding



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side by side out of Norway and into the Storskog border compound in Russia's extreme northwest. Enclosed by triple-lined razor wire fences, countless video cameras and heavily armed guards, we can't help feeling guilty – but of what, we aren't sure.

The Norwegian border post is a mere 100 feet behind us. That's all it has taken for the world we understand to change and our place in it. Inside the Russian immigration hall a stern-faced young man sits at a low plastic table. Without looking up, he waves us over, and we obey. Jaw clenched, his eyes darting between our papers and us, he takes his sweet time stamping our passports. But finally, with a firm inspection of our bikes completed, we ride toward the last barrier where the last green-clad sentry lifts the gate and throws us a casual salute for good measure. We have strict instructions not to stop under any circumstances for the next 12 miles while in the military zone, which strikes home the fact that we have come to take our BMW's reliability for granted.

In Russia

Riding east of Storskog, we push deeper into the Murmansk Oblast region. The wide, unnamed, dusty, gravel road cuts a swathe through a dense forest of conifers. The GS squirms beneath me, as neither tire can gain any real purchase, and only controlled blips of the throttle are keeping the bike upright. Three miles in, I glance in my mirror only to see Lisa hit the dirt hard, her front tire diving into a deep hole of sand and rock.

A road worker beats me to Lisa's aid, his young 20-something years disguised by a weather-ravaged exterior. A thick layer of dust clings to the cotton of his sun-bleached cap, while black plastic wire keeps his boots done up tight. Caught off guard by the weight of Lisa's bike, he rights the blue beast on the 4th attempt. His success is reason enough for us to share our water, swapping gestures for words, and with energetic handshakes and warm smiles exchanged, he sends us off with a hearty slap on the back. "Welcome to Russia," I yell at Lisa over the roar of the engines.

Two hours in and the great green lushness of Scandinavia has been methodically slaughtered on the outskirts of Nikel. Our 'Lonely Planet' Russian guidebook terms it "hell on earth." They're not far wrong either. Aggressive strip-mining has ravaged the landscape, releasing vast amounts of sulfur dioxide into the environment, killing everything within a thirty miles radius.

Nothing lives in this dead-zone: not a bird in the sky, not one solitary, defiant tree or a single blade of grass. Scorched earth and harsh brown hills roll into the distance. Dirty smoke belches from five tall chimneys and barefoot children beg by the road. An extreme, alien world – and as we pull over and turn off our machines, the eerie, unnatural silence stuns us.

Thirty miles southeast, Mother Nature has brightened her look, become more comely, with the landscape turning from bomb-blast brown to a healthy green. And for the first time today, we feel enough at ease to fill our lungs properly.

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Heat Waves and Back Slaps

Another marked difference, in contrast to the sub-zero temperatures of the last few weeks, is the sweltering heat. And by 6pm, we are glad to see the scattered, low steel shacks that make up Murmansk's sprawling periphery. Amid rush-hour traffic, weary arms steer a course around the warren-like maze of decaying tower blocks into the heart of what was known as the "Hero City" in the former Soviet Union. On the hill above us the immense concrete statue of Alyosha, a World War II soldier, towers over the city, blocking the light of the setting sun. Down by the ports, a two-mile web of rusting steel girders, cranes and lifting gear stand in silhouette where the land meets the Barents Sea. This is a working city, the largest in the world north of the Arctic Circle. Cameras are prohibited, and security is strictly enforced. We breathe sighs of relief when finally pulling into the car park of the Hotel Polyarnye. Our trusty guidebook describes it as "plush and secure" – but having hot showers and security comes at a price. The \$80 rate

cuts deeply into our budget, but the peace of mind is worth it.

We slept heavily, and by 10am we are pulled over at the side of the road. The bikes have attracted a crowd. Twenty curious locals encircle us, and in halting Russian, we are doing our best to get directions. The words aren't important, we understand the crowds sentiment; excitement, wonder, and curiosity. "We have never seen English here. Why do you come?" Peter asks. A local schoolteacher, with a bushy mustache and his dirty flat cap pulled low over his eyes, he says, "I learn my English from The Beatles – I am good, no?" Their questions answered as best we could, every one of our new friends shakes our hands, grins broadly and slaps us vigorously on our backs. Backslapping is clearly a Russian custom. Thank heaven for body armor.

New Friends

We ride the A114 up on the pegs, something we've become used to. Dirt spits furiously from our wheels, expressing our newfound off-road confidence, and the winding route slices through the thick boreal forest of the Kola Peninsula. It's the beginning of July, and Western Russia roasts in the hottest weather experienced in nine years. We haven't seen a soul for hours. Then comical disbelief rapidly halts our southerly progress. Parked in the center of our track, a Russian MIG fighter plane seems poised to launch skyward. No plaque indicates the importance of this once-feared piece of weaponry or why it's sited there. There isn't a town, village or air museum for miles. We are left to simply wonder as we ride away.

A few hours later, we pull into Tikhvin. "You cannot stay here, is not safe!" Sergio shouts as he slams his car door

shut and walks towards us. Within a few minutes his sincere concern for our safety has struck a chord. As with any other town in the Eastern Leningrad, Tikhvin has seen better days.

"You will stay with my family tonight, yes?!" Our new friend is adamant, and we gratefully accept. Dusk is settling as Sergio leads the way into a Soviet-style apartment block. At the foot of the dark concrete stairwell, dim lights flicker as the poor wiring crackles and "Elevator is broken for four years now," he apologizes, starting the climb to the fifth floor where Sergio, his wife Katrina, and their two small children live. Once past the three steel doors and the countless locks we are welcomed into their home like old friends. Inside, the homey decor, soft carpet underfoot, and the warmth of Sergio's family easily make us forget the grim reality outside.

Katrina offers us the last of their hot water for washing up and lays out their bathrobes like prized possessions, which we gratefully accept. Over a simple meal of cured meats and white cheese, we feel the day easily slipping into tomorrow as we eat, drink, laugh and talk, aided by a Russian-to-English pocket dictionary. It's been said that when traveling, you meet the best people when you need them most. Sergio and his family affirm that adage.

We still have a long way to ride before Moscow, and when our bodies demand food at regular intervals, roadside truck stops serve us traditional food: mainly warm hearty stews and thickly cut vegetables covered in some kind of mayonnaise more often than not. Pointing at the same meals placed before people around us, and then at our bellies, brings on some well-intended laughter, but we are understood.



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The Heart of 'The Mother Land'

In Russia's vast and ancient capital, the streets are choked with traffic. Drivers lean from their vehicles, cheering as we pass, their honking horns a celebration not a warning. The golden cupolas of St. Basil's and the angled skyscrapers of Moscow business district glisten under a thin mist in pink light. Sweat-sodden, we park in front of the immense Hotel Russia, just a stone's throw from Red Square.

We stroll in the very center of Red Square the next afternoon. Before us stands Lenin's Tomb, a gleaming granite mausoleum, and beyond that the imposing walls of the Kremlin. To our right, the brightly painted onion-shaped domes of St Basil Cathedral look like giant candies.

After days of playing tourist, absorbing what Moscow has to offer, we are seated by a window in an up-market cafe in central Moscow for a little rest. Our bikes, parked outside, are still drawing attention. Lisa and I are discussing changes to our itinerary. And in the next instant, while comfortably sipping our strong black coffees, our world is violently rocked. A deafening, booming blast from close by

shakes the place. Cutlery rattles on the table and an unnatural stillness follows. We wear the very same shocked expressions as those around us, and we soon hear the cause was a Chechen suicide attack that destroyed another café we had walked past just the day before, only a quarter mile from our hotel. Our decision to leave Moscow sooner than later has most emphatically been made.

Africa Ahead

Two hundred miles west of Moscow, nearing St. Petersburg, Lisa and I reflect on our time on the road. It is strange to think that it has been just two short months since we waved goodbye to the security of our home, friends and family, and yet we seem to have come so far, seen and learned so much. More, we would have thought back then, than that amount of time could allow. We let our minds wander and breathe in all of what this new life of ours offers, paying tribute to it and the adventures to come.

We can only imagine what Africa has in store.

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Norway and Russia

FACTS AND INFORMATION

Total Mileage

Norway approximately 2,400 miles.
Russia approximately 2,800 miles.

In General

Norway offers rolling farmlands and vast boreal forests to the dramatic western fjords. Above the Arctic Circle, the population thins, the horizons grow wider and the temperature dips. The best time to visit generally runs from May to September. Most Norwegians speak very good English.

Russia's great size confounds generalizations. May to September is also the best time to visit Western Russia, and basic knowledge of Russian goes a long way.

How To Get There

Norway requires a valid passport from U.S. citizens, but no visa is necessary for stays of up to three months. All the large cities and towns in Norway have airports providing international and domestic flights. Entrance to Russia requires a valid passport and visa. You can either cross via one of the western land borders or fly directly into Moscow.

Food & Lodging

Seafood is a staple in Norway, and fish is served in every conceivable manner. You can also buy moose or reindeer steaks. Alcohol is limited and expensive (you'll pay \$10 for a bottle of Bud!). Norway allows free camping on public land. Other campsites are plentiful and most offer showers, a kitchen and even television. The average cost is \$33. Good but more expensive alternatives begin with bed and breakfast inns. Just watch for "rom" or "husrom" signs along the way.

In Russia, adequate hotels vary in cost from \$40 in cities to \$3 in the countryside. But once you've ridden out of the city environs, accommodations can be very tough to find. Paying a little extra for secure parking is a good idea.

Roads & Biking

Norway's road quality is generally good; but in the north, it has many unpaved roads. Tunnels can be badly lit and normally tolls are charged. Vehicles must be driven with dipped headlights at all times and an international driving permit is required.

Road quality in Russia is often good on the major roads, and the secondary roads vary from corrugated asphalt to gravel and mud. Watch out for the tramlines that weave through the streets of most cities.

Books & Maps

- o *The Rough Guide to Norway 4*, by Phil Lee, Rough Guides, ISBN 978-1843536604, \$20.99
- o *Russia (Country Guide)*, by Simon

Richmond, Lonely Planet; 5th edition, ISBN 978-1741047226, \$29.99

- o *Michelin Road Map No. 752: Norway*, ISBN 978-0785971740, \$16.95
- o *Russia Map by ITMB (International Travel Maps)*, ISBN 978-1553413769, \$12.95

Addresses & Phone Numbers

- o Bergen Tourist Information
www.visitnorway.com
- o Moscow Tourist Information Center
www.moscow-city.ru
- o Royal Norwegian Embassy in Washington
www.norway.org
- o Embassy of the Russian Federation
http://washington.rusembassy.org

Motorcycle & Gear

BMW R1100GS
BMW F650GS
Luggage Systems: Touratech Zega
Jacket and Pants: Hein Gericke Tuareg
Helmets: BMW System 4
Boots: MX boots -Alpine Star Tech 6 and Gearne SG10

