
Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award

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Siberian Dreams

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Dedication

To John Pilkington, founder of the Journey of a Lifetime Award, and the Royal Geographical Society, for believing that the world must always be re-discovered.

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INTRODUCTION

I first heard about the *Journey of a Lifetime* award from a friend.

Fifteen years of comfortable middle-class life in a leafy suburb of London had recently dissolved into bankruptcy and redundancy, both of my employer and my personal relationship. Forcing myself to focus on the dwindling positives in my life - free time, no commitments, and a hard-fought-for but ultimately generous pay-off - I'd decided to take a year out of the rat race and fulfil some long-cherished travel schemes.

That year had passed wonderfully but all too quickly and I'd returned from my journeying to try and figure out what to do with the second part of my life. I was contemplating my long-out-of-date CV when the phone rang.

My friend Pete had just heard about the *Journey of a Lifetime* award on Radio 4. A joint annual initiative between the BBC and the Royal Geographical Society, the deal is deceptively simple. You write in with the details of the journey you'd most like to make, and if they like your idea more than anyone else's, you get £4,000 to undertake it and make a radio programme for the BBC about your experiences.

'You could go to that place in Russia you're always banging on about,' Pete said.

It's not every day you get offered money to take your trip of a lifetime. It seemed ridiculous NOT to write in, particularly since I was struggling to think of how Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award exactly I was going to pick up the pieces of my shattered life. My 'journey of a lifetime' might be bizarre enough to at least catch someone's eye in the hundreds of Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award application letters that would flood in to the Royal Geographical Society.

What Pete said was true. I had been banging on about the place for years. What had started as a joke among work Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award

colleagues - 'Behave, or I'll send you on a fact-finding mission to Norilsk!' - had slipped unnoticed into my sub-conscious over the course of time. Not strong enough to be called accurately an obsession, it had nevertheless become a Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award familiar part of my mental furniture, a curiosity to be trotted out occasionally during Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award late-night ramblings with friends about weird travel destinations.

I admit I was unusual in even knowing of the existence of this mining city in Russia's frozen Siberian expanses. I only did so thanks to my career as a financial journalist. I'd written about commodity markets and then I'd progressed to managing other people who wrote about commodity markets. Oil, gas, grain, sugar, coffee, cocoa and rubber - most of us take them for granted, and most of us are blissfully unaware of the powerful forces that make these building blocks of life some of the most Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award volatile markets in the ever-expanding world of global trading.

My area of special expertise encompassed the markets for industrial metals such as Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award copper, aluminium, nickel and zinc, the raw materials that invisibly facilitate much of our modern, day-to-day life.

Norilsk is a massive producer of metals. Inside the Arctic Circle, literally in the middle of nowhere, some 200,000 inhabitants live and work around its sprawling network of mines and metallurgical factories. Winter lasts Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award eight months. Temperatures drop to levels I Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award find impossible to get my head round. It has periods of both twenty-four-hour night and, during the brief summer, twenty-four-hour daylight. It's the biggest single source of industrial pollution in Russia, which means it's off the scale of any other developed country.

The more I'd written about the metals that spewed out of Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award this Siberian giant, the more I'd wondered about the people who lived there. My career as a financial journalist had not been planned. Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award It had resulted from a couple of fortuitous turns in an otherwise directionless Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award path. Was that also how you ended up working in a polluting metals plant in what must be a strong candidate for the world's grimmest city? And if a couple of life's rolls of the dice had brought you there, why on earth would you stay?

With my growing curiosity about life in this alien city had come a different set of questions. Questions about Russia. Norilsk's history is as alien as its climate, but it is one that has melded the place into a refracted Siberian reflection of Russia's uniquely weird development over the second half of the twentieth century.

From a gleam in Josef Stalin's eye in the 1930s, Norilsk was born as a prison camp in the Soviet gulag system and remained so until after his death in the 1950s. Then, like many Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award other camps, it metamorphosed into a closed city, part of the Soviet Union's huge military-industrial complex,

near invisible to outside eyes. Only with the Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the resulting tidal wave of change that swept eastwards, did Norilsk emerge into at least partial daylight.

Its only customer, the Soviet military, had just gone out of business and it survived in the only way it could, by exporting its metals to the West, to us. It was still touch and go as to whether it would survive, though. There were times in the 1990s when the miners weren't Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award paid for months, the power stations were failing and the company which ran the whole place, Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award Norilsk Nickel, was technically bankrupt. And to rub salt into the wound, most Russians had just seen their savings wiped out, which meant that no one had any money to leave Norilsk, whether they wanted to or not.

Since then, though, it had hauled its way back into profitability thanks to the intervention of the enigmatic Interros Group, the corporate embodiment of one of Russia's new oligarchs.

The multiple personality changes of this far-flung city made me come to view Norilsk as an Arctic palimpsest of all the drunken lurches in Russia's stagger to the new millennium.

I had never been to Russia. I consider myself both a moderately literate and well-travelled man, but Russia in Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award any living sense was a void to me. Beyond a schoolboy knowledge of its history and a lot of dry financial facts and figures, my visualisation of the place didn't extend much beyond a random collage of parts of the film *Doctor Zhivago*, a few of the James Bond series, and footage of the May Day parades in Red Square with all those Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award missile launchers rolling past.

That last Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award bit, of course, Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award was also Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award the main reason for my almost complete Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award lack of knowledge about the country. It's easy now to forget how long the Soviet Union was our enemy, that swathe of red sprawling across the pages of the atlas, making Western Europe look like a small, messy disintegration of land into the sea. Generations of us lived under the threat of nuclear obliteration by this menacing eastern giant. What else were those May Day parades about, if not a blunt way of saying, 'Look how many tanks and missile launchers we have'?

When the Soviet Union finally collapsed under its own inert weight in the early 1990s, Russia was welcomed back by the rest of the world as a long-lost Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award relative. I happened to be in Rome Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award when President Gorbachev visited the city. Hundreds of thousands of people lined the streets to hail this liberator of the East.

But the public interest didn't last more than a handful of years of curiosity - 'So, how have you been all this time?' - before it shifted elsewhere. The typically Russian shambles of a coup attempt in 1991 seemed to reassure the rest of the world that the country could safely be left to

shuffle along in its own chaotic way without too much scrutiny.

Friends went on weekend city-breaks to Moscow and Siberian Dreams: Winner RGS/BBC Journey of a Lifetime Award more so to St Petersburg. Everyone told me I should go and see the Hermitage museum. But I didn't want to go and see the pre-Revolution palaces of the Tsars. These buildings, however impressive their façades and however delightful their interiors, would not help me find out about the Russians. Who the hell were these people who had been my enemy for half a century? And what were they up to now? Was life good? Was it better than it had been?

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