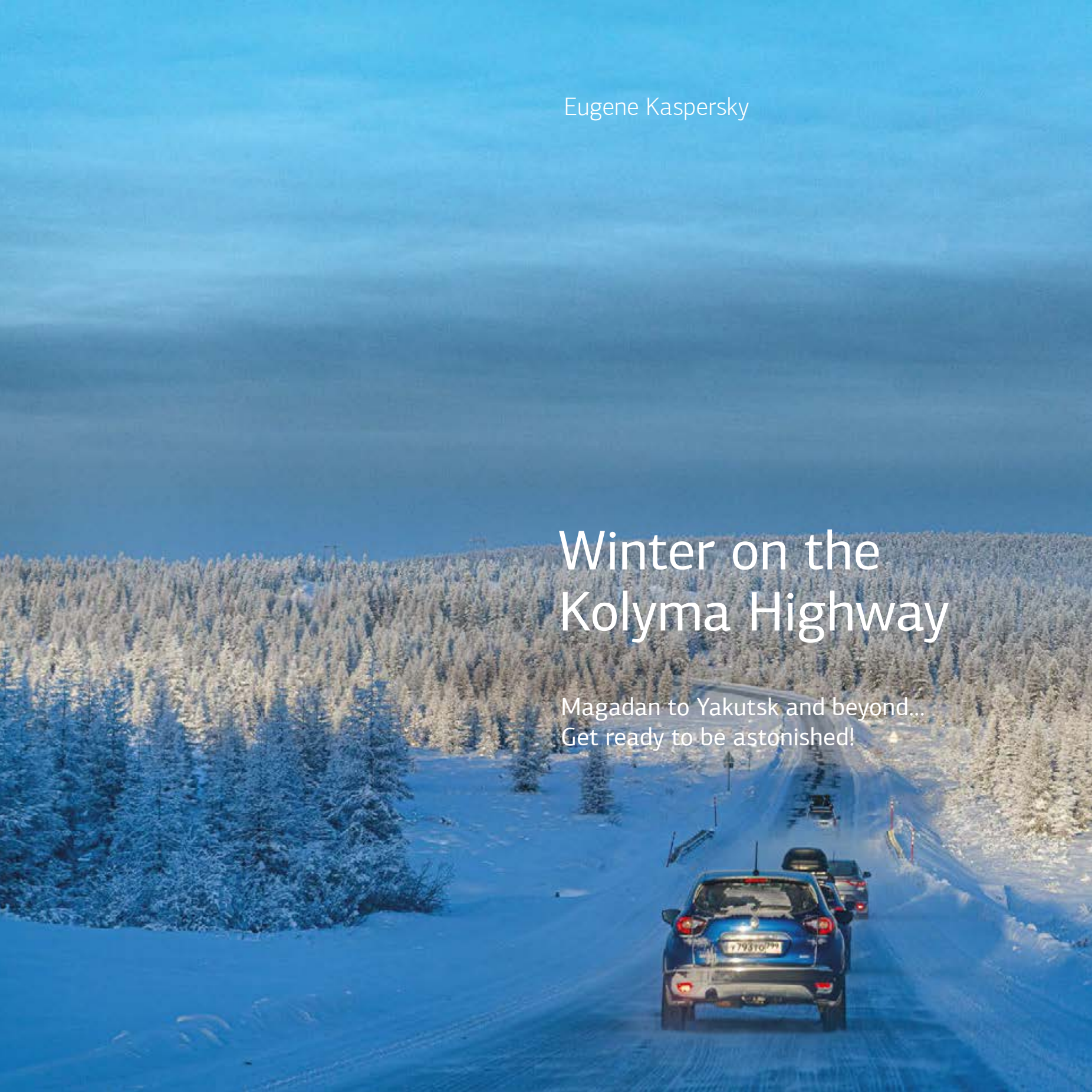


Eugene Kaspersky

Winter on the Kolyma Highway

Magadan to Yakutsk and beyond...
Get ready to be astonished!



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Magadan to Yakutsk and beyond...
Get ready to be astonished!



From the author

The time has come to tell the tale (and show the pics) of our wonderful winter road-trip along the legendary Kolyma Highway in Siberia in early 2021.

Instead of the expected “drive to the Pole of Cold, get frozen to the bone for a bit, then drive back/onward”, the journey turned out to be action-packed, a whole lotta fun, and of course extreme – given the intense cold. But I don’t think any of us was quite expecting such a magical world of endless, mostly straight roads cutting across vast white expanses of severe steppe or forested undulating hills stretching as far as the eye can see. And it goes without saying that all my fellow travelers were just as suitably spellbound and hypnotized by the experience as I was.

Being so far north, and the time of year having been the middle of winter, the sun would hardly ever rise at all from its slumber each day; but this would imbue the icy landscapes with a paradoxically warm golden glow for much of the day like nowhere I’ve seen before. Endless open spaces; everything covered in either snow or hoarfrost – or both. In short: non-stop deep-frozen astonishment!



So, like, what in the devil's name gave me the idea of a road trip in such a far-away, forbidding and freezing corner of the earth in the first place? Elementary, dear Watson: because of the ghastly bio-virus that was still running rampant all over the world and, due to it, every darn thing being closed. As a result there was very little of my usual globetrotting and continent-hopping going on. So we had to come up with an alternative closer to home. So I had a think, and asked around among my traveler friends about where we could get ourselves to in Russia in the winter of 2020–2021. Several options were suggested, among which was Oymyakon – said to be the coldest permanently-inhabited settlement on earth.

Now, this village, though tiny (and literally in the middle of nowhere), is quite famous, at least in Russia, due to its “world’s coldest” status, and as such I’d both long known about the place and long wanted to get myself there. And of course I wanted to be there when it’s at its very coldest – in the middle of winter (the post-New-

Year holidays – ideal). Then we might get to experience -50°C or lower – obviously a must-do for anyone).

Some of you may be wondering why Oymyakon is referred to as the world’s coldest place, when there are plenty of settlements further north, some – much further north. Well, I won’t go into the climatico-meteorological reasons why, but I will tell you that it is at least (arguably) the “Pole of Cold” (the world’s coldest spot) of the northern hemisphere. Never heard of the Poles of Cold? You have now! Oh, and the Pole of Cold for the southern hemisphere? A bit less surprising: it’s on Antarctica, at the Russian Vostok Research Station, where the lowest temperature ever recorded (last time I checked) was -89°C ! But that’s some 3500 meters above sea level and it’s not permanently inhabited; Oymyakon is a mere 740 meters above sea level, and is an actual functioning settlement with roads, schools, stores... So when Oymyakon can boast around -70°C , well, isn’t that way cooler (!) than Vostok (no roads, no shops, no schools,

no nothing but a few huts!)? I mean, it’s colder in winter in Oymyakon than even up at the North Pole! (Up there, the oceans warm the air up somewhat.)

There happens to be another contender for the coldest settlement in the northern hemisphere – the village of Verkhoyansk, which isn’t all that far away – relatively (what’s a thousand kilometers between rivals? :). Sure, we’d have liked to have checked out this challenger too, but we settled for just Oymyakon in the end: it’s much quicker to get to from the highway, and it’s simply more famous too. Oymyakon sure “would do”).

Read more:



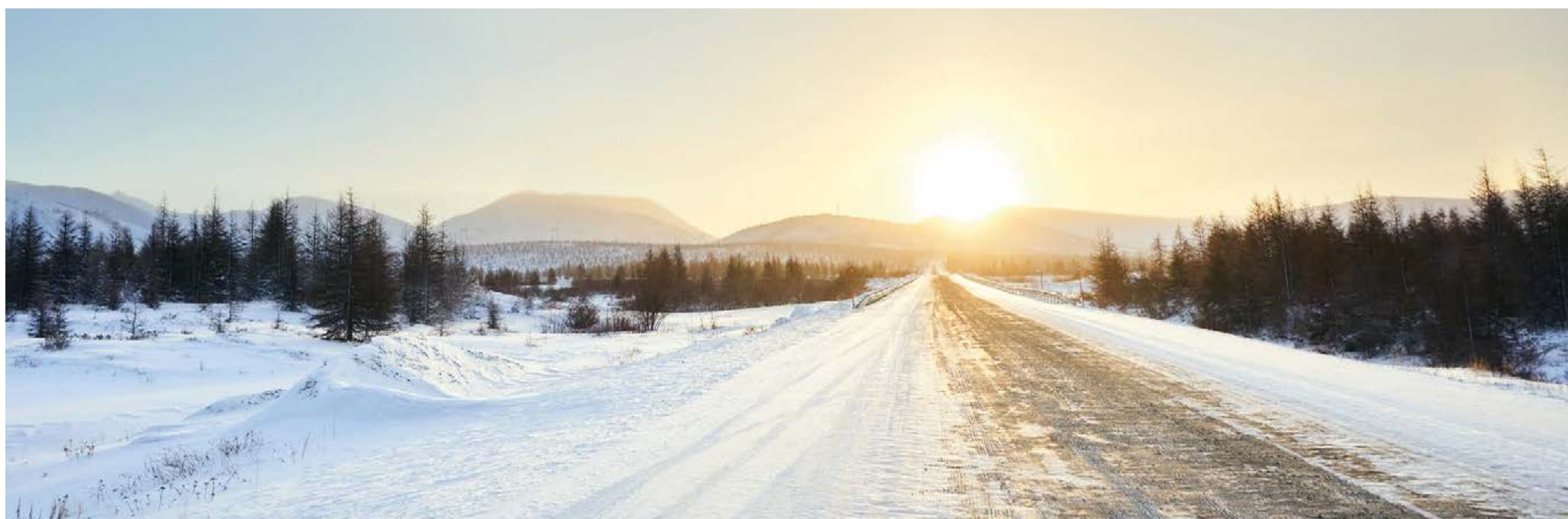
All righty. So we'd settled on the "where". Next came the "how"...

It turned out that getting to the Pole of Cold is not so difficult – only not quite as quickly as you might expect. Curious tourists are normally flown in to Yakutsk, the capital of Yakutia, through travel agencies based in the city. You land, you transfer to vans, and you're driven to Oymyakon – which takes... two days! You spend a day or two there walking around in the extraordinary cold, then it's back into the vans for the two-day journey back. Oof.

Hmm. Four days on the road as a passenger, two days one way, then two the other way – on the same road. Sounded very dull. But if I could just get behind the wheel myself – that would certainly take the edges off the tedium. So I asked if it's possible. "Da", came back the reply. But then we had a look at the map, and observed how Oymyakon is almost precisely in the middle between Yakutsk and Magadan. Thus, the Yakutsk–Oymyakon–Magadan route was proffered: at least we wouldn't be repeating a stretch of one and the same road just in opposite directions. Ok. Decided. A 2000km+ A-to-B expedition. Sweet. But then we kept looking at the map...

Though 2000km+ is hardly a drive to the supermarket, it still seemed somewhat an underwhelming distance to me when I looked at it on the world map. So, in typical *moi* fashion, I had a think; rather – a rethink: "Hold on. Why are we planning on stopping at Yakutsk?" I thought. "Surely further = better, to make it a "proper" auto-expedition, much like those I'd been on in Tasmania, Namibia, New Zealand and Australia?", I continued to muse. "We should drive all the way to Moscow!", I declared to the others. And to my astonishment the response from the gallery was one of agreement. Woah!

And that was that. Magadan all the way to Moscow: it was going to happen!...







...And it did happen: we drove practically across the whole of Russia! The roads east stop at Magadan (no road to Kamchatka!), so we couldn't have set off more eastward (Vladivostok is well westward, btw) even if we'd wanted to. In Magadan, setting off, our sat-navs showed ten thousand kilometers were ahead of us. In the end, given our zigzagging and detours to go see old friends, we covered more than 12,000! That's more than New York to Los Angeles – and back!



Astonishment No. 1: winter-wonderland fairytale

Getting to Oymyakon isn't quick these days. There was once an airport nearby – in the neighboring village of Tomtor – but alas it was abandoned long ago; accordingly, you get to the village by road. The drive from Yakutsk takes two days; from Magadan – three. We were bracing ourselves for the three days of weary monotony necessary to get ourselves to the world's coldest settlement. Little did we know – we needn't have!...

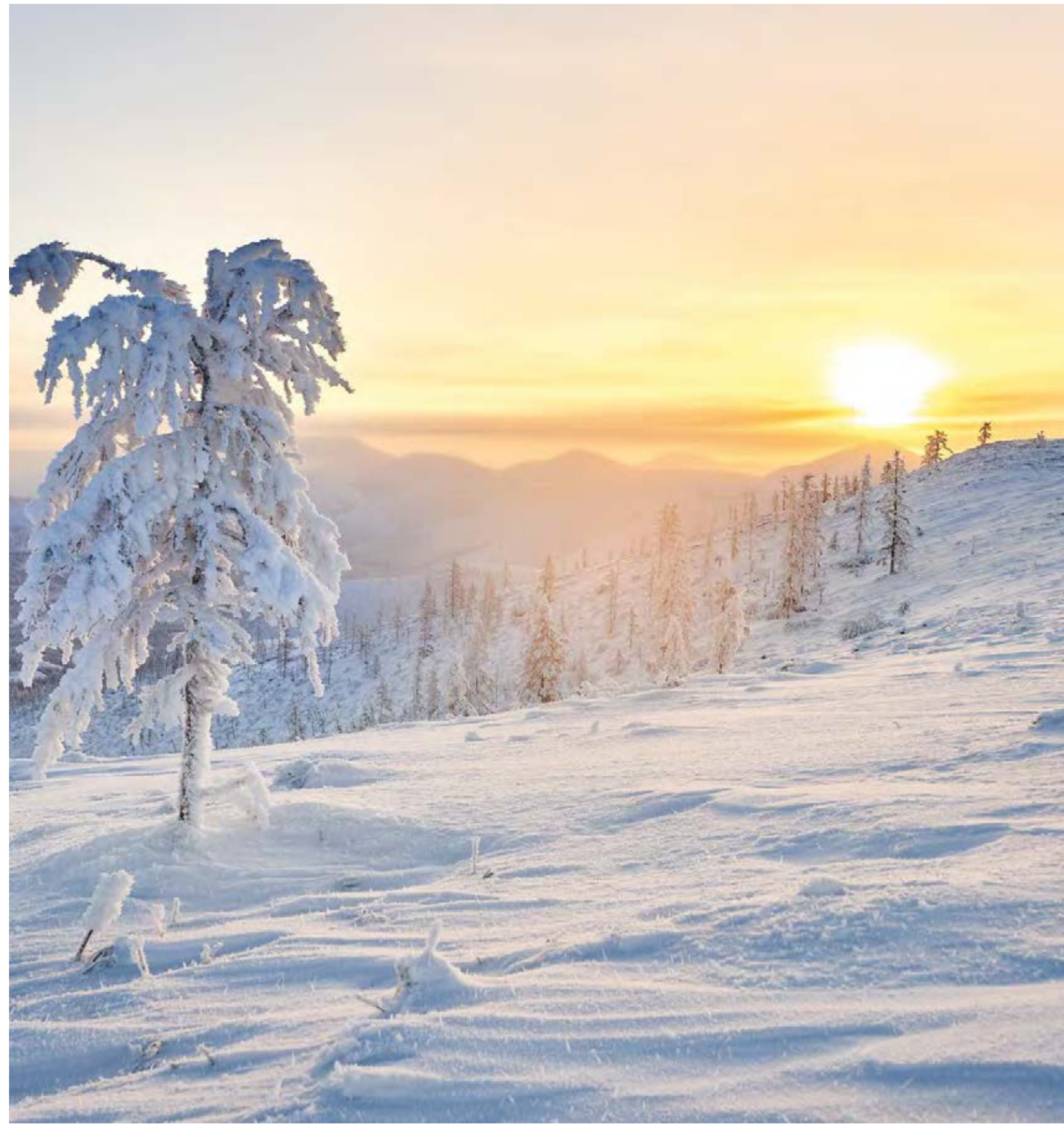
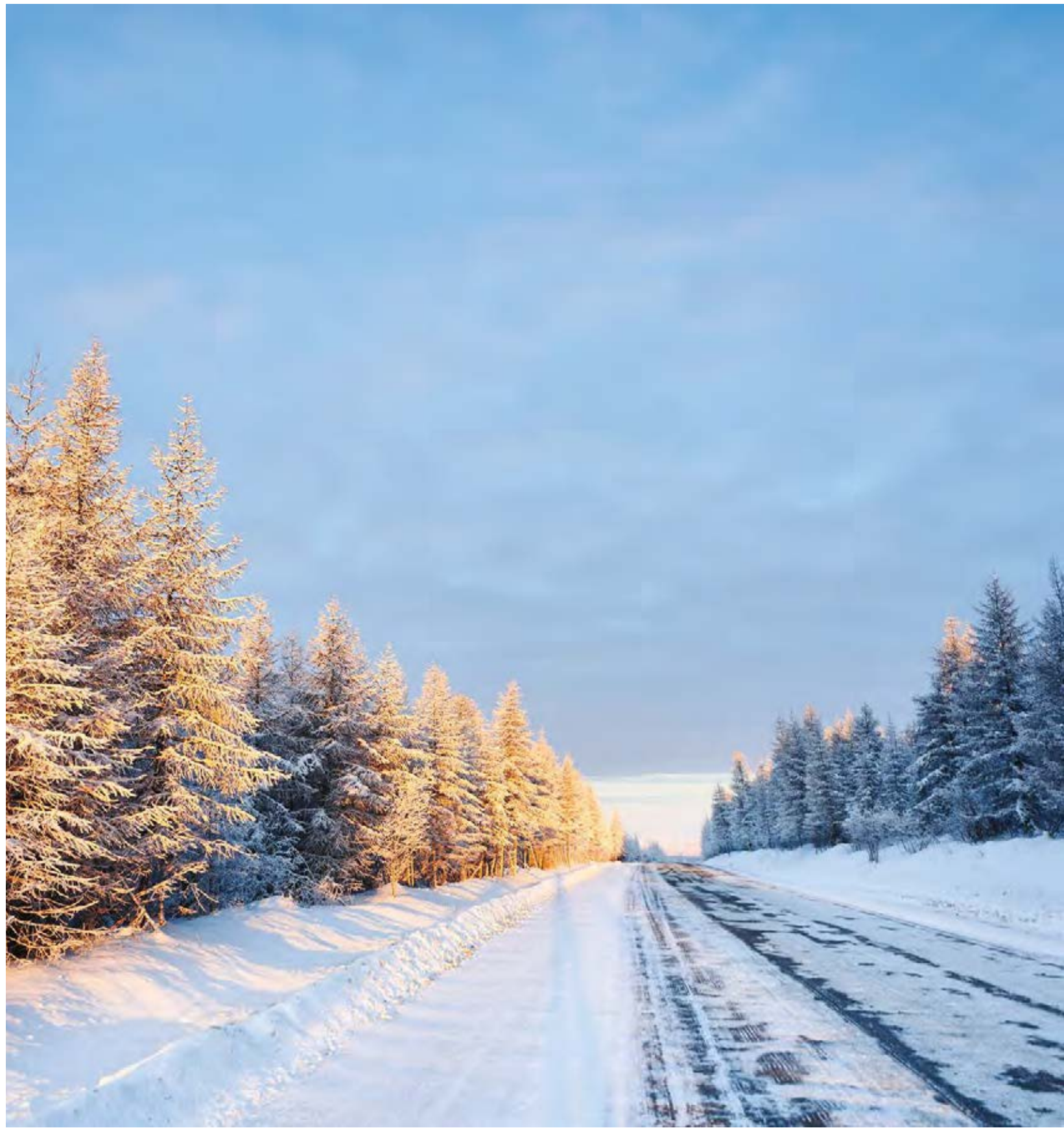
Instead of days of boredom on a remote road, we entered a fantastical world of wonderful winter-whiteness!

The fairytale began just after sunrise as we crossed our first mountain pass on the road. The world stopped being gray; it became white and silver; and golden – from the low sun.

The first astonishment came simply from how beautiful everything was. Unexpected, unpredictable, unbelievable: the Kolyma Highway is simply magical!

It's just so stunning – almost to the point of euphoria – driving along a highway through a completely white world. The road rises up a bit, hour after hour, then a little to the right or left, down again and straight on – and the white fairytale scenes never stop. How far we'd gone or had still left to go was ignored. Another descent, and into an icy fog. And it's oh-so bitterly cold: for several days it never got warmer than -50°C (-58°F)! Later it did. But it was this first ultra-cold leg of our journey that was the most ultra-entrancing.







Road without end

On the first day we covered some 700 kilometers from Magadan to the town of Susuman. Seven hundred kilometers – yet we passed through just five tiny settlements: Palatka, Atka, Orotukan, Debin and Yagodnoe. In fact there were more mountain passes we crossed than settlements we drove through on the first day. There was Karamkemy just a hundred kilometers from Magadan, then the colorfully-titled Deduskhina Lysina (Granddad's Bald Head!), and Yablonevi (Apple-ish!). It's after a few hundred kilometers when the temperature starts to fall sharply (all the more noticeable for acclimatizing tourists who'd just flown in from... Maldives!). But with the plunging temperatures comes something else, as if to make up for the sudden intense cold: everything turns pure white. Incredible, extreme, serene scenes.

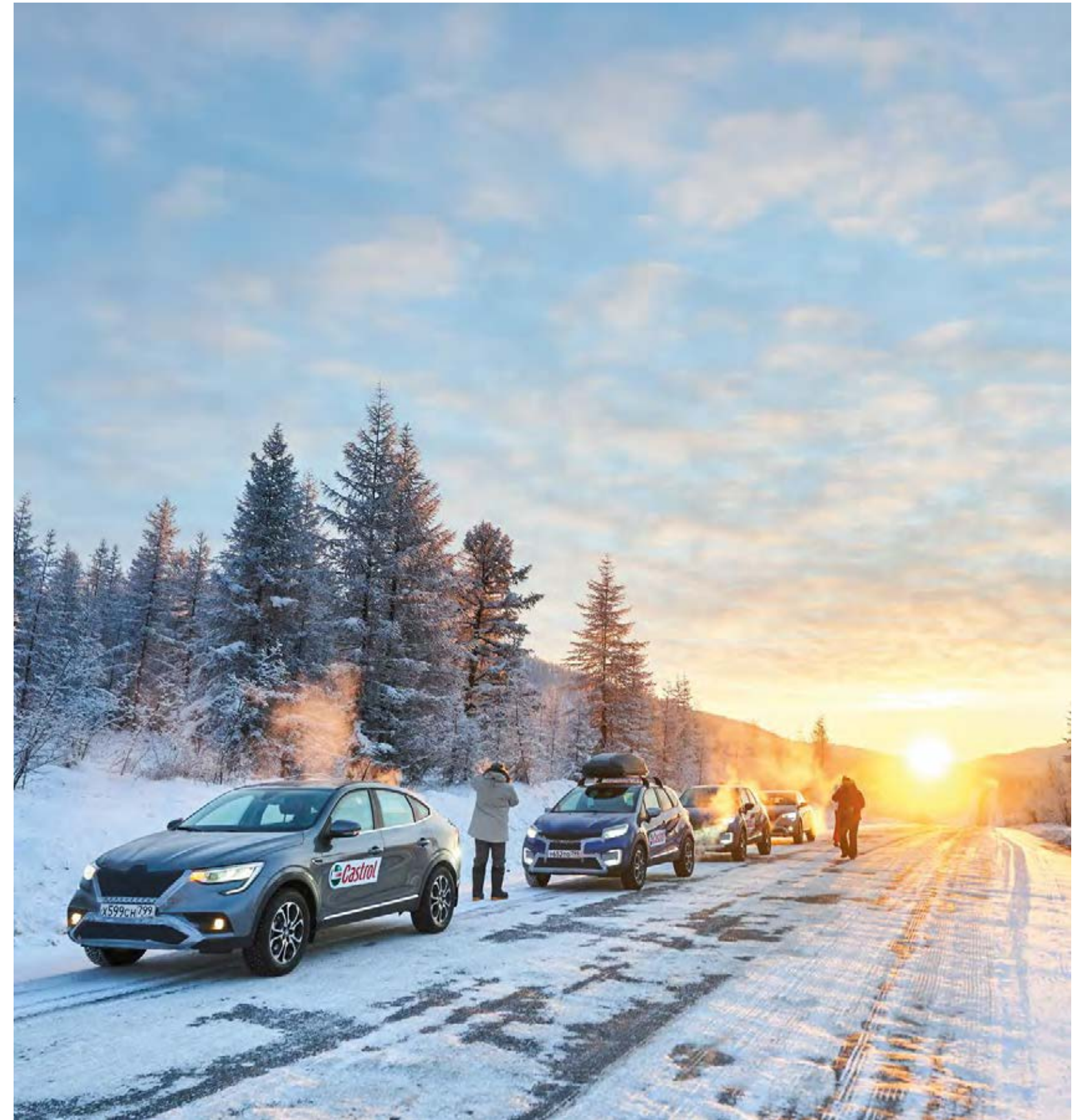
Everything – trees, signposts, safety barriers, telephone lines – completely covered in white hoarfrost. You travel a hundred kilometers, 200, 300... and it's all the same: a never-ending snowy fairytale that spellbinds – almost like hypnosis. On, and on, and on. And with hardly any need to slow down to take a turn, you get into a groove: the car basically drives itself while you just stare at the road ahead – trance-like!

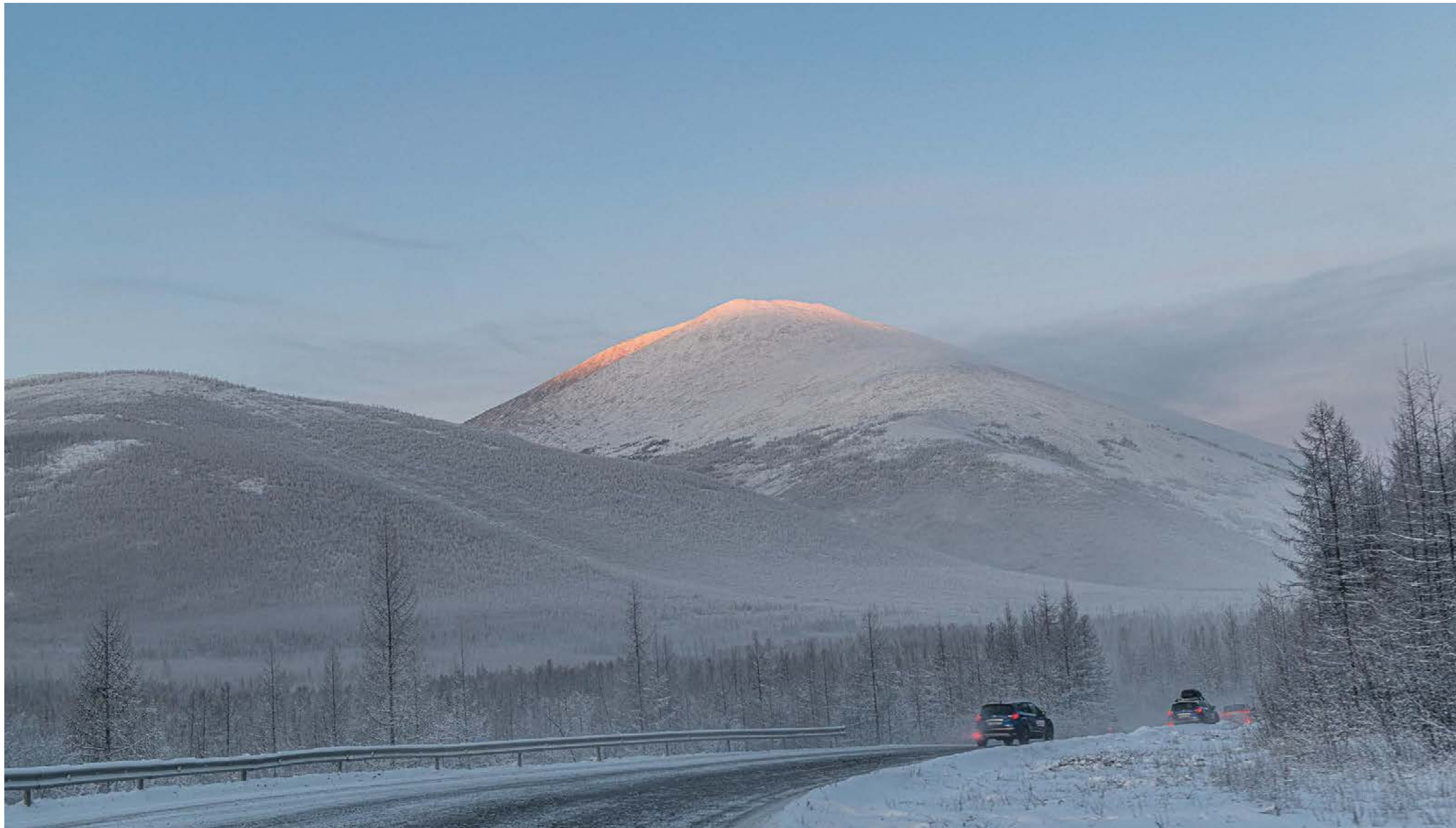


The self-hypnosis and automotive-meditation continues...

Time seems to just come to a halt! Synchronization is required! On, and on, and on... – until we hit breaking point, as in: needing to break out of our vehicles and get a direct, unhindered feel of all the whiteness in its glorious ultra-frozen magnificence. So out we pop, fully zipped up, hatted up, gloved up. Sure, the gloves get in the way when trying to take a photo, but we still manage to take a few. We generally stopped on mountain passes, atop hills, or simply where the views were all the more staggering.

Not stopping – impossible. All around was so beautiful. If heaven ever freezes over (yes, I know it's normally hell that does that :), then this, surely, is what it would look like!





Alas, daylight is short-lived each day on the Kolyma Highway. The sun would come up around 9:30am (but remain hidden behind the hilltops for half-an-hour or so), and it would set around 3:30pm. That gives just six hours of daylight: woefully little time for photography stops. Still, the scarcity of light hours meant that, when we did stop, each minute was treasured to the fullest: it was straight down to the business of seriously swift snapping; no aimless, frivolous activity (too cold anyway!).

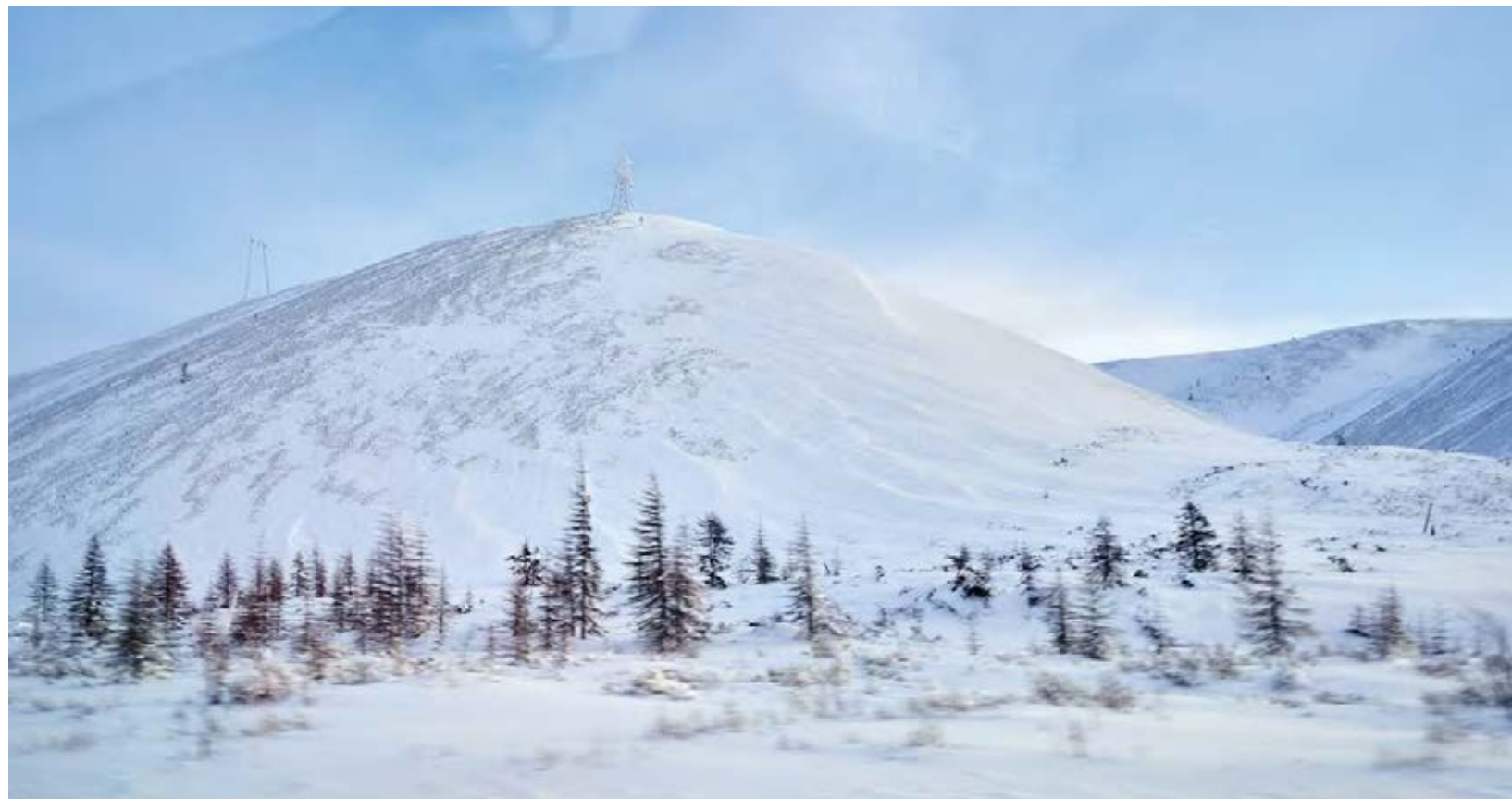
After frosted dense forest scenes, next up were vast open spaces and gently undulating hills and valleys: a different type of Siberian automotive-meditation: a snowy fairytale – “with Brothers Grimm undertones,” someone commented).

Video: winter roads of Yakutia by night



For 99.9% of the time the road was completely empty but for us. When suddenly...!





Our first stop was some 80 kilometers from Magadan in a village with the unusual name of Palatka, which means “tent”. Apparently there’s a false belief that the name comes from the early days of the settlement (in the early 1930s) when it was merely a collection of tents put up before the buildings were built during the construction of the highway. However, it seems that’s just a coincidence: the name actually appears to date back a lot earlier than the 20th century – from two ancient Evenk words, palja and atken, meaning “stony river”!

From Magadan to Palatka there are quite a few settlements along the highway; after Palatka – hardly any at all, and very little oncoming traffic. Also, a few mountain passes after Palatka, the temperature sinks below -30°C and edges toward -40 rather quickly. Occasionally we see old abandoned settlements near huge mountains of dug-up earth: remnants of gold mining. Indeed a great deal of the countryside appears to have been dug up, the gold extracted, and countless black-gray pyramids left behind for young forests to grow up from. The industrialism here was clearly brutal.



After Palatka, our next overnight stop was to be in the town of Susuman. Onward we drive (for what seemed like an eternity), taking in the brutalized scenery all around (which still has its charms). Just before Susuman there's a village named Kholodny ("Cold"). And it really is the ideal name for the place for, brrrr, it is sooo darn freezing there: it was passing through this village when our Renaults' temperature gauges (measuring the outside temperature) simply stopped working – at around -40°C ! From then on we had to use the thermometer we'd stuck to the windscreen of one of the cars!

We finally arrive in the town of Susuman – the region's "Gold Capital" (since it's here where the largest gold-mining companies are based). Before turning in for the night – a few pics around town...



Video: Susuman



The town's tech-education center, featuring its aviation design club's hands-on learning device: a genuine IL-18 cockpit!





Next morning, heading northwest out of Susuman, the trees are covered in hoarfrost and the air is frightfully cold. Abandoned former mining settlements, spoil tips. After about an hour-and-a-half we come to Kadykchan – a ghost town. Kadykchan was once a so-called “monotown”, with its single industry being coalmining. Founded during WWII, its population grew to over 5000 at its peak (in the mid-80s). It was already in decline after the fall (in 1991) of the Soviet Union, but an explosion in 1996 finally sealed its fate once and for all: the coalmine was shut down and the inhabitants started leaving in droves – helped by government subsidies to relocate. Extraordinarily, 10 years after the mine had closed (in 2007) there were still 200 folks living there! But three years later – in 2010 – the population had fallen to zero (imagine the story (and emotions) of the very last inhabitant – walking out through the front door to their apartment for good and not needing to lock or even close it!). Today the place still “exists”, in that there are buildings and roads left and you can still look the place up on the map, but it’s an afterlife really – completely abandoned and deserted; there’s also now no electricity, no running water, no heating, no schools, no shops, no cinema (as there once was)...

Walking around a ghost town, as the name might suggest, is a bit spooky. The place reminded me of similarly eerie walkabouts in the abandoned naval base at Brouton Bay in the Kurils, and Bechevinka in Kamchatka. Strolling through the desolation, you perceive the emptiness not only of your surroundings, but inside of yourself too. Creepily strange.



This is – rather, was – Kadykchan’s school building. The fading inscription reads: “Welcome to the world of knowledge”

A Banksy wannabe has added some stenciled graffiti on quite a few of the buildings, perhaps to brighten – or liven – up the place. Not sure they succeeded; not sure it’s even possible...



Back on the road, we pass this here monument to the flight crew that perished in a plane that crashed as it was being flown from Alaska to Siberia in the 1940s as part of Lend-Lease



The astonishing beauty of the mountain pass that divides the valleys of the Kolyma and Indigirka rivers. IMHO one of the most beautiful spots along the whole of the Kolyma Highway



Astonishment No. 2: Good roads – despite what Gogol said!

In these snaps of the highway, have you noticed just how smooth and cleared of deep snow it is? Well, while taking said snaps, I sure noticed – and couldn't quite believe my eyes. And this was my second amazement on this trip: the quality and keen maintenance of the roads.

So what was I expecting instead? Well, like most anyone who lives in Moscow, if I would hear words like Yakutia, Kolyma, Magadan and "roads" together, I'd expect the accompanying scenes to be thoroughly, utterly grim and hopeless. Something like: thousands of kilometers of poorly-surfaced, potholed, muddy roads, streaked with deep ruts and with plenty of cars getting stranded in thick mud awaiting assistance. How wrong I was!...

The full length of the road was absurdly well-kempt and cleared of most of the snow – even though there was absolutely no one around! It was like... science fiction!

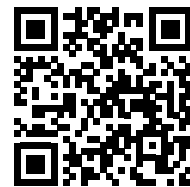
For around 100 kilometers from either Magadan or Yakutsk along the Kolyma highway – it's surfaced with smooth asphalt, is fully and

clearly signposted, there are crash barriers where necessary, and the road markings are fresh. Along the more remote stretches there are SOS-comms and life-support points, and through the smaller settlements there's also asphalt (though it's not so great).

You'll surely be wondering exactly how the roads are maintained so impressively along the full 2000+km, and by whom. This may surprise you, but... I still don't know! We didn't see armies of (or even just one or two) snow-clearing or salt-scattering vehicles along the full route. See; told you: sci-fi!

Curiously, Nikolai Gogol, one of Russia's great writers, once said that Russia's two biggest misfortunes are... fools and bad roads. That was in the 19th century. Still today, in the 21st, Russians continue to refer back to Gogol's famous quote, considering it to still be relevant. Well, after traveling the full length of the Kolyma Highway in the year 2021, I can now say that, if Kolyma is taken as representative of Russia as a whole... there's just one big misfortune Russia suffers from today!

Video: Eight hours of dash-cam footage from Magadan to Susuman





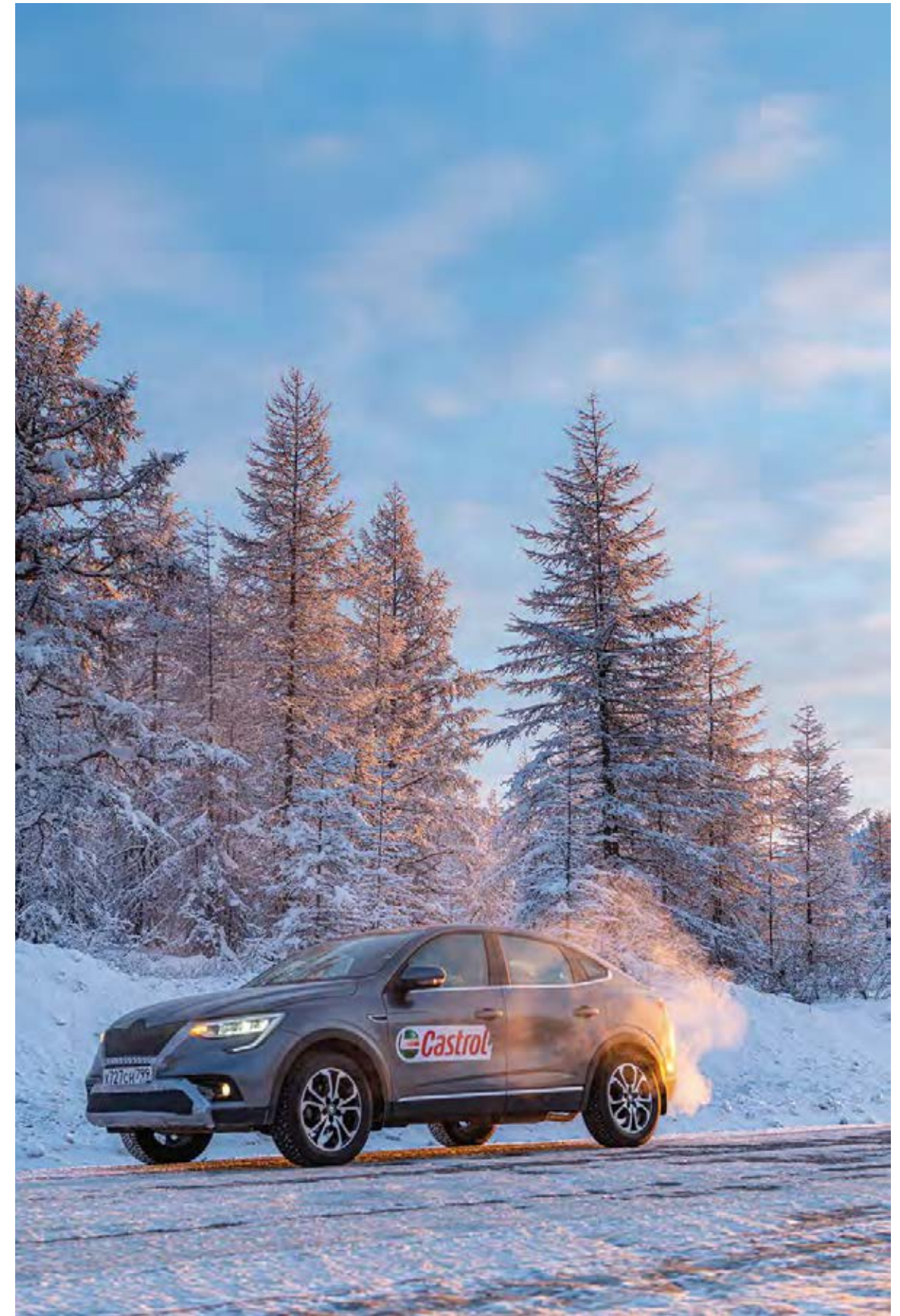
But wait – no so fast: I have to admit the road wasn't perfect. In places the asphalt had seen better days. There was the odd deep pothole here and there, but they were at least the exception to the rule; and thank goodness: for, when the mercury went below -50°C , our cars' suspension would stiffen up (aka freeze!), making us able to detect every small stone that happened to lie in the road that we drove over – through our backsides! Still, the fact that the collective backside was at least still intact and functional after Kolyma was I think further confirmation that the great misfortunes of the country can be counted on... the thumb of your right hand! And that looks set to last, for there were road repairs – actually, mostly new road being laid – everywhere, or construction materials being ferried to such undertakings.

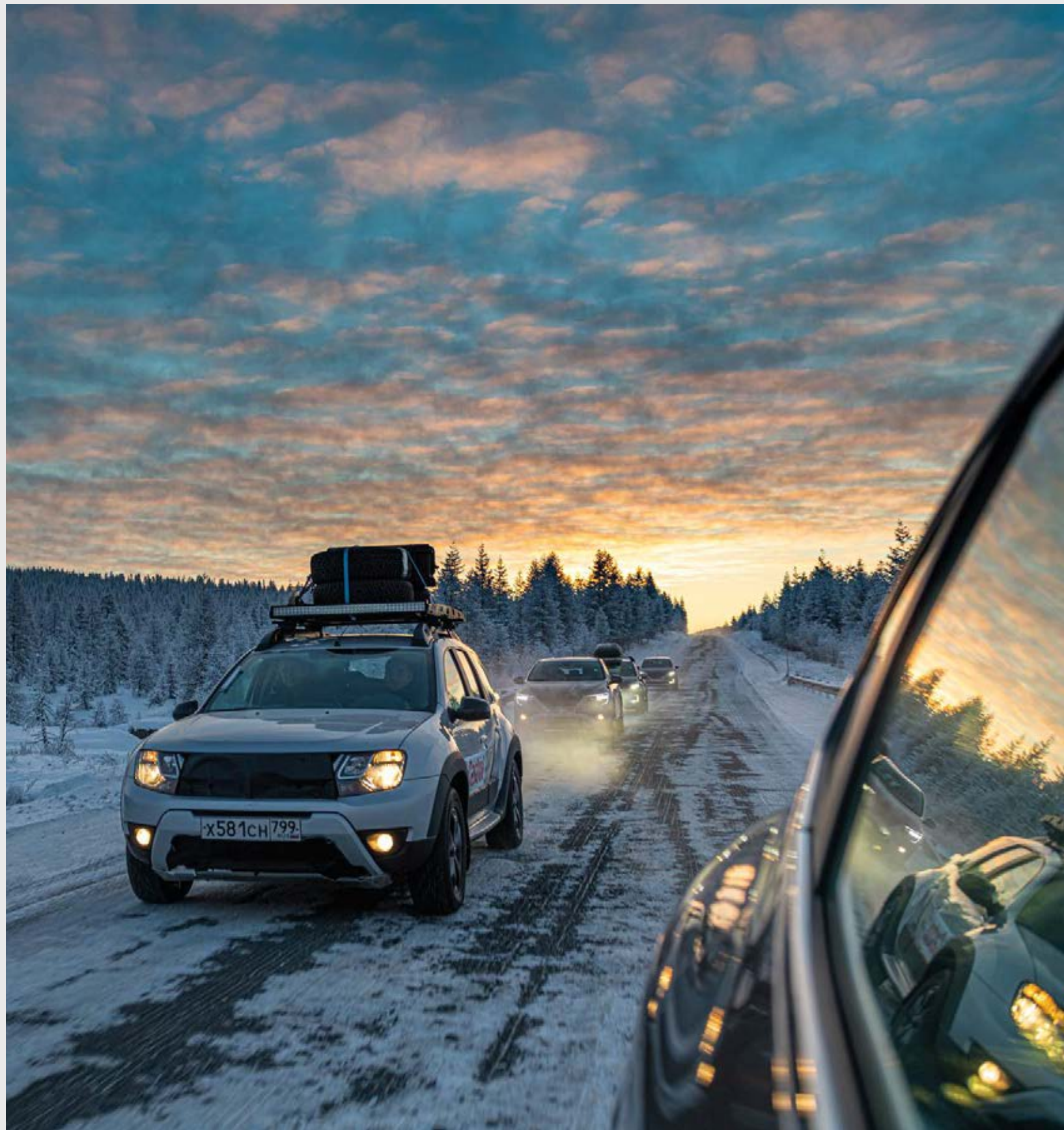
However, my assessment of the quality of the road here only applies in the deep of winter. In the summer things are different: very hot, dusty, mosquitos, midges. And remember – the road is only partly asphalted: most of it has just a covering of rather sharp stone chippings instead, which of course is a lot firmer in winter as it's all so thoroughly deep-frozen. The gravelliness can apparently be really quite aggressive in summer, and has been known to even slash summer tires! So yes, remember: these tales of mine are exclusively *winter-tales*.



But what about the other two seasons of the year – spring and fall? Well, actually, in these months the Kolyma Highway is... fairly useless; that is, if you want to drive from, say, Yakutsk to Magadan or the other way round (or some shorter section), since there's no bridge to cross the river Aldan near Khandyga! In winter there's the winter road that appears across the frozen river; in summer there's the ferry that takes you and your vehicle across. Spring and fall – no way, Andrey!

I recall how my Kolyma-dreaming was interrupted once by the CB radio: a discussion suddenly came out of nowhere regarding whether we should use the vehicles' cruise-control. It did seem like a good idea: the road was smooth and straight, so why not? Sure would be easier on right foot. It was decided it was indeed a good idea. Further discussion was over what speed to choose for our cruising: 80km/h? 90km/h? (any faster isn't advised: as mentioned, at around -50°C the cars' suspension may snap.) But just then, a tanker truck overtook us, which must have been going 110–120km/h! The discussion came to a swift end: we'd best stick to manual, fast-reaction, feet-on-the-pedals mode – just in case!...





About the cars...

In-between my *Kolymeditations*, as we raced along the highway I would often think how the poor souls who built the road in the first half of last century – in such harsh climatic conditions and across such inhospitable landscapes – probably could never have imagined in their wildest dreams that one day, in the next century, there'd be not only the freighting of essential

cargos along Kolyma, but also... the adventurous cruising of motorhead tourists – purely to satisfy their curiosity and amusement needs!

You'll have noticed already that we were all in Renaults. Indeed, from Magadan to Yakutsk, it was the French motors we were all in – two Arkanas and one Duster.

So, why Renaults?

Well, due to coronavirus, we'd had to change our plans abruptly and rather late in the day. Normally to sort the logistics of such a long trip from one of the remotest places in Russia would take a year at least. Still, undeterred, we started ringing round companies to see if they could step up – quickly. In the end it was only Renault that could – or would. Well thank *dieu* they did! Sure, they'd be getting some great free PR (and they were welcome to it!), but all the same: they did come though: so *merci beaucoup*, and big *le respect!*

Video: How to adapt/tune cars for Yakutian temperatures



So how were the cars adapted for such an extreme expedition? Actually – hardly at all! They’d just had a few minor “home-made” special mods done to them to cope with the intense cold...

They’d blocked the front vents so the mega-cold air didn’t get into the engine compartment, and also insulated under the hood – with some blankets! Castrol 0W-40 motor oil was used – special arctic oil that never freezes, and all the other fluids were changed out too, including the brake and windshield-wiper fluid. On the windshield they’d added sealant around the edges so that absolutely no cold air could somehow worm its way inside. And the side windows had second, plastic windows attached to keep hoarfrost at bay and maintain good visibility (for our regular snapping from inside the cars – of the utmost importance:). In addition to the modifications, there were also a few extreme-expedition-specific items added to the inventory carried by each of the vehicles in the trunk: a spare can of fuel and some dry rations, and in some of the cars – spare wheels. But besides all that – nothing else. Not bad for standard, consumer vehicles that were hardly designed (in Paris, no doubt) with minus-fifty in mind).

Btw: all Renault-related logistics were sorted by our friends at Avtorazum, whom we’d used before (for our vehicles when driving over Lake Baikal!) and will surely use again. Thank you!

We made it along the full length of the ~-50° Kolyma Highway, which took several days, without incident vehicle-wise. Nothing overheating, nothing freezing up, nothing

breaking down – not even a flat tire. In a word: woah. Also, Renaults (in their unmodified state) are good on certain details that really matter in very a cold country – all the more so on such a country’s coldest road! Examples: heated windscreen, heated steering wheel, and heated seats. The only things that weren’t super-duper were: the fact that below -50°C the heating element in the windscreen couldn’t really cope, and (in some cars) – especially the diesel Duster – the heater never quite fully warmed the interior up. Still, they can be forgiven these slight shortcomings (and we could have had special heaters fitted, but didn’t have the time to think about that). And anyway, the heating thing was an issue only when it was crazy cold (but we were suitably attired, even in the cars, remember?!); by the time we started heading south toward Chita (where it was a mere -30°C or warmer:), it was hardly a problem at all.

What else about the cars? Let me list a few curiosities...

- Regarding the speeds we got up to, we didn’t drive all that fast – normally around 70-90km/h (45-55mph); this was so we didn’t wreck the suspension and other vital parts of the vehicles!
- After the cars had been at a standstill for a time (while refueling, having lunch, other stops), we’d drive at first really quite slowly; this was in order to give the engine (oil, etc.) and suspension and other components some time to warm up a bit so that nothing (figuratively and literally) “blew a gasket”!

- In an open-air parking lot, we’d always park with the nose of the cars facing the exit; this was so that their frozen-to-death steering rods, levers, suspension and what-have-you didn’t... snap when moving off! And another thing: turning the steering wheel to the max left or right was categorically forbidden.

- The above three points – they apply to daytime; nighttime: no way were the cars left outside. Instead, they were treated to a nice warm – mandatory! – garage to sleep in!

Communication between the cars on the expedition was done on walkie-talkies. Especially at night, whenever there’d be a turn in the road, the car at the front of the convoy would radio to the cars behind to warn them: after all, the cars behind would often be in a cloud of snow blown up from the road in the wake of the cars in front. And that cloud of snow was made all the more dense and blustery due to the fact that the first car had a roof-rack on which was strapped a huge suitcase and a pile of spare wheels; the first vehicle’s roof also featured substantial racks of fog lights (both front and rear). Due to this, tailgating the front vehicle beast was not a good idea. The fog lights, btw, were normally switched on – and on Kolyma they really are needed (like nowhere else I’ve ever known:).





The village of Ust-Nera is situated around the half-way point on the Kolyma Highway (between Magadan and Yakutsk), in the Sakha Republic (commonly known as Yakutia). And, heading west, 40km after it there's one of the Highway's most extraordinarily beautiful vantage points: the Olchansky Pass. Astonishing vistas! Snow-covered hills all around. As if the whole world's frozen...

Olchansky Pass

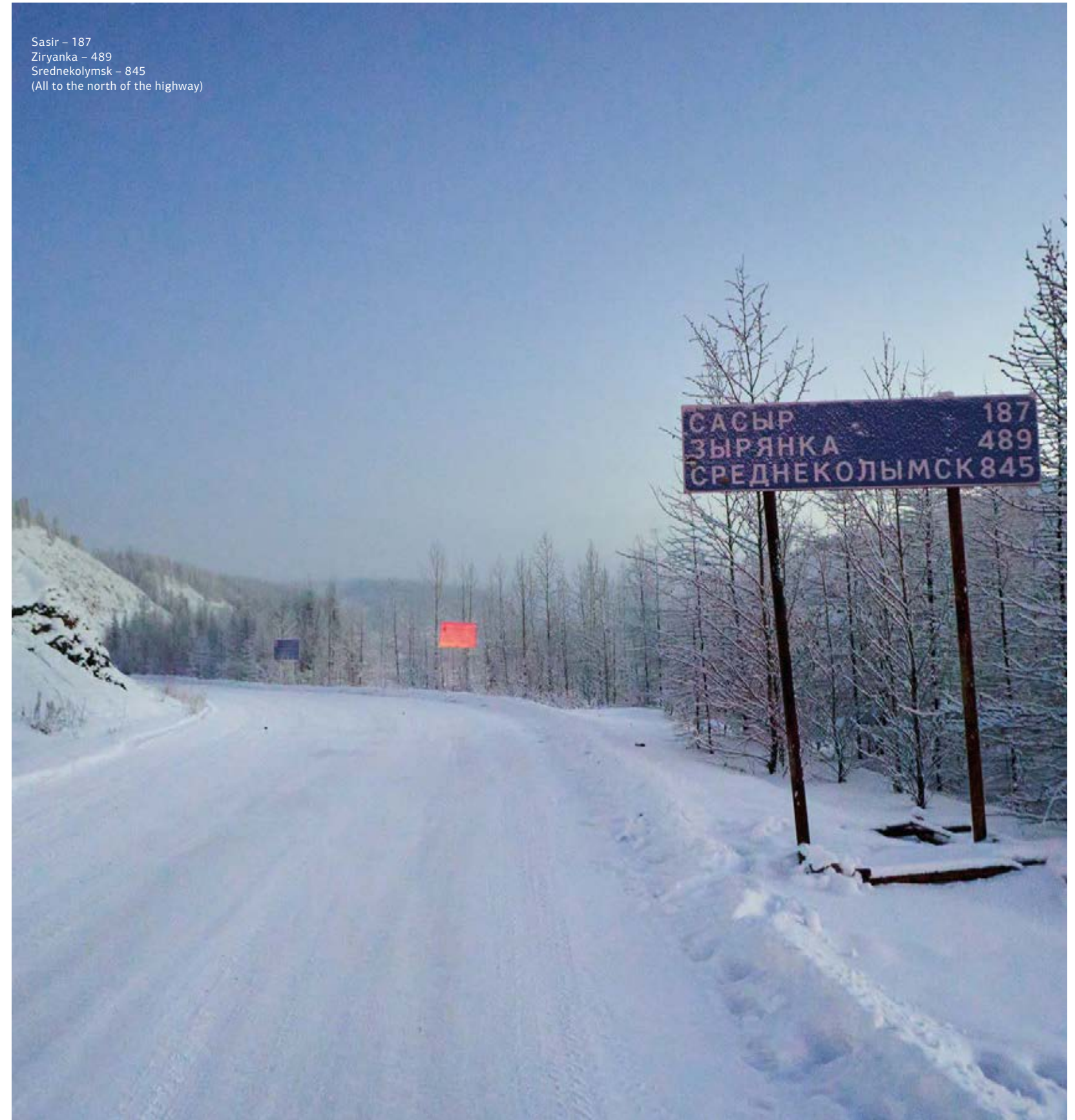
The 1111-km distance marker: Petrovich and I simply couldn't pass it without a snap (11-11 was the internal working name of our secure operating system prototype, now called KasperskyOS – just in case you're not up on the K-lingo :)





Ever wondered what it's like to ride on a sleigh pulled by reindeer, just like Santa Claus? Well you can find out right here!

The reindeer is such a charming creation – and for the locals here it's essential for their survival. For them, the reindeer represents: transportation, food, clothing, and business (with passing tourists contributing to the latter). The reindeer herders live in canvas tents like this one; apparently such modern tents are more convenient than traditional raw-hide teepees. A stove is on the go inside, there's a diesel-powered generator not far off, the father has a smartphone in his hand, and then this cheeky little one peeks out of the front door! Apparently his older brothers aren't home – they're out tending to the flock. Such an idyllic scene – and all at -50°C !



Sasir – 187
Ziryanka – 489
Srednekolymsk – 845
(All to the north of the highway)



The winter road to Oymyakon

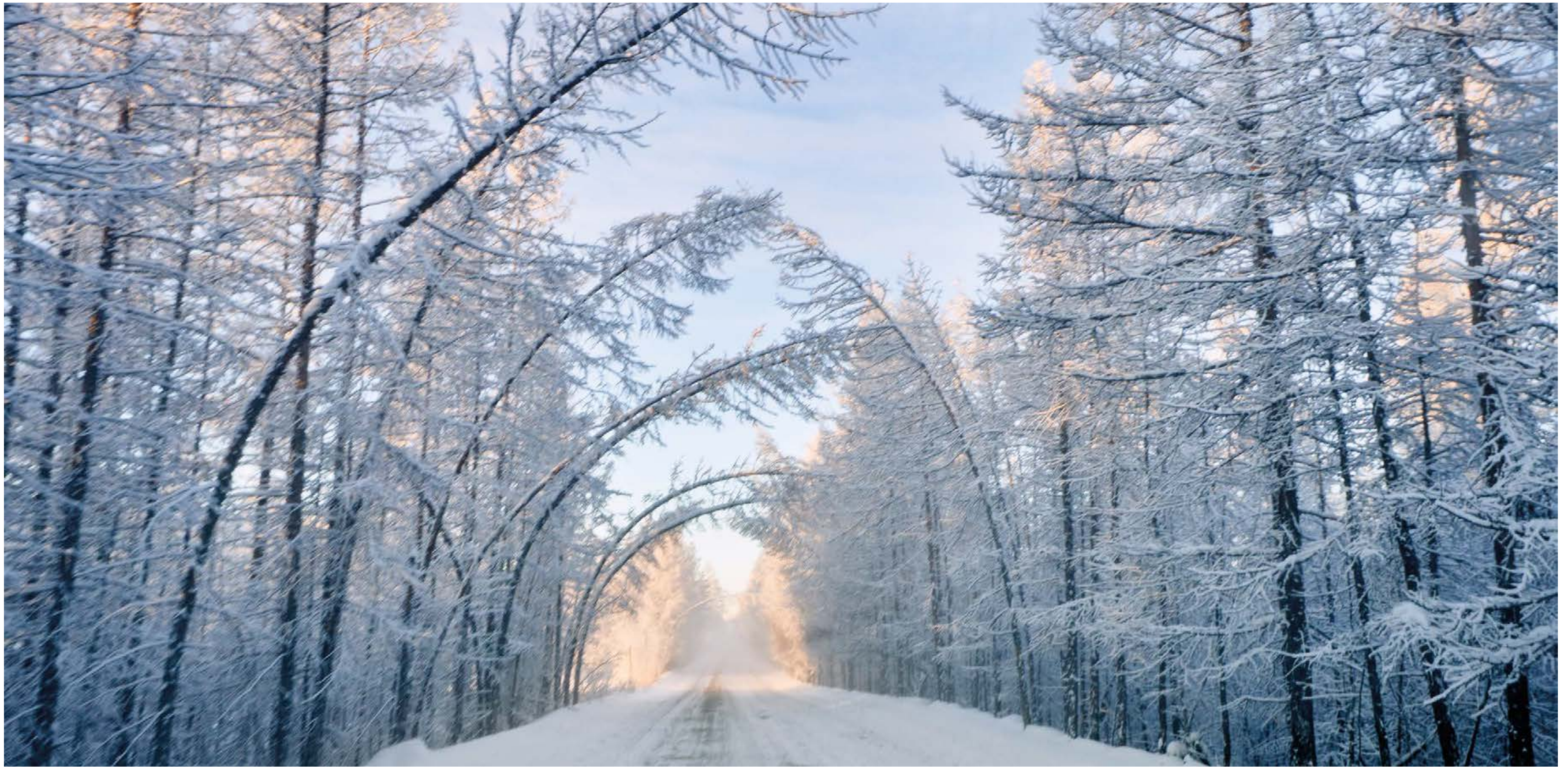
It was time for the main course – the reason this whole Magadan-to-Yakutsk (before “and then to Moscow” was added) road trip was undertaken in the first place. Thus, we took a left turn in the direction of the villages of Tomtor and... Oymyakon.

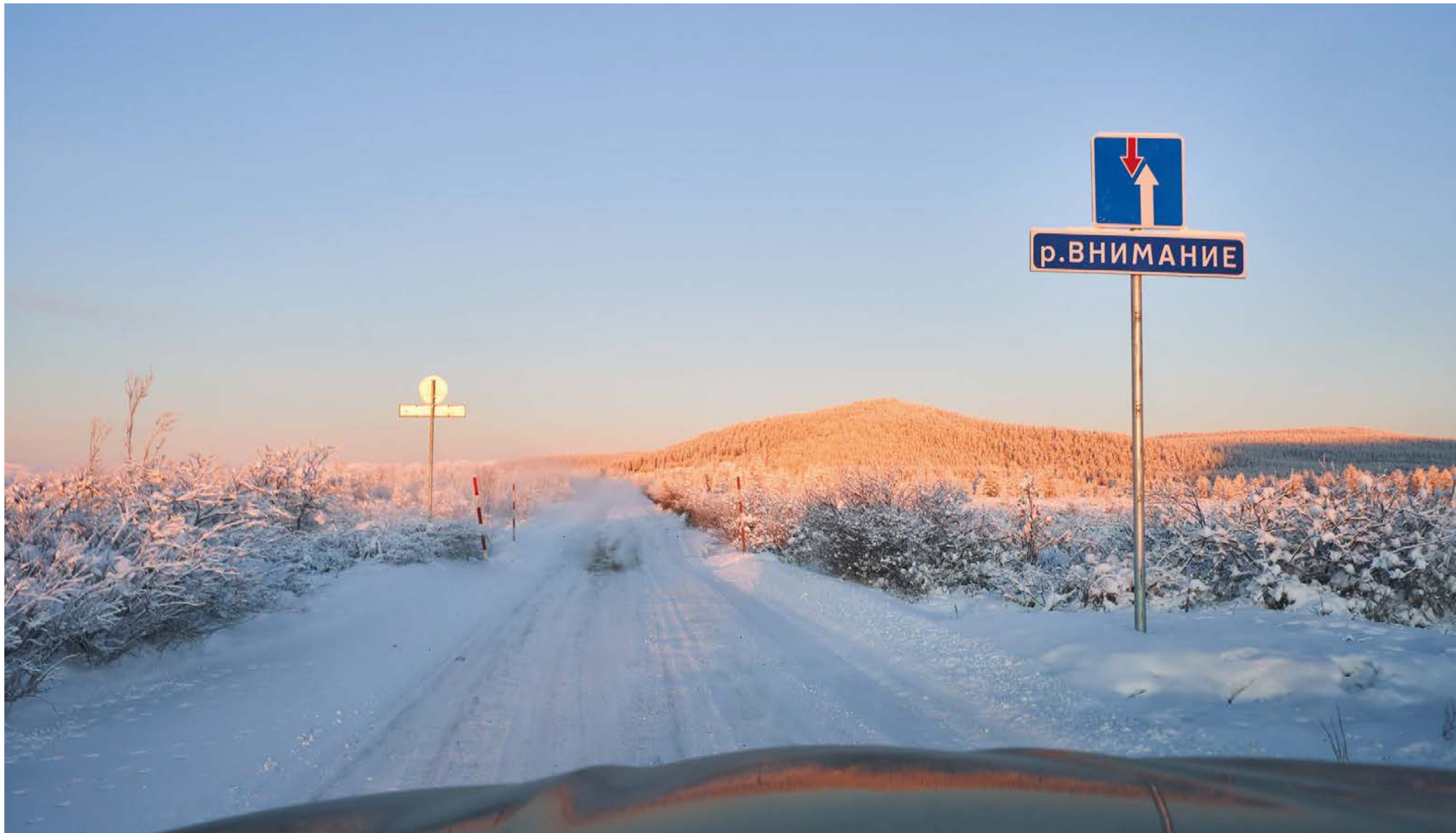
The road's a minor, single-track one, but it's well-maintained: not a single pothole, and the snow was completely cleared along its full length. It's also impressively smooth and well-signposted; it even has distance markers!

Another pleasing factor: the road was practically empty. On the first day traffic was minimal (we saw just one or two other vehicles), while on the journey back to the highway we saw not one other car!

We were already somewhat getting used to the extraordinary beauty of the winter scenery on this road-trip; however, on this backroad it seemed all the more off-the-scale beautiful and mind-blowing, which I hope these photos convey...







Video: Full-day dashcam recording on the winter road from Ust-Nera to Oymyakon



The one and only Oymyakon: the situation on the (frozen) ground

We eventually make it to the legendary Pole of Cold of the northern hemisphere – Oymyakon.

Remote? Check.

Tiny? Check.

Neglected, forgotten in the sands snows of time, and down-at-the-heel? No!..

Oymyakon is very much “alive”. Somewhere around 400-500 folks live here, and the log cabins they live in are really rather decent.

There’s centralized heating (as in – piped water arrives at each cottage already hot; not as in heated individually per cottage), a stable supply of electricity, satellite TV, and even Wi-Fi!

Oymyakon may be alive – but sometimes you wonder quite how, given that it’s just soooo very cold. The coldest ever officially recorded temperature here was a little under -65°C . Incidentally – the hottest it’s ever been was almost $+35^{\circ}\text{C}$! Woah: that’s a temperature range of more than a hundred degrees centigrade!



Oymyakon at night –
our first pics upon arrival

Now, a few words about the owner of the place we stayed at. Her name is Tamara Yegórovna, and she's a lot more besides simply someone who rents her place out Airbnb-style. It turned out she was the one who came up with the idea of and implemented the whole Oymyakon-as-an-adventure-tourist-destination – so it's down to her that thousands of tourists have already been here. She's also a historian with several published books on Yakutia to her name, and she runs the local museum. And in 2018 she won the All-Russia Businesswoman of the Year Competition!

Though warm and freshly-refurbished, our lodgings in Oymyakon had a few spartan elements to them: the WC is in the back yard – and has neither heating nor lighting! There's also no shower and no bath! Not to worry; we managed just fine without ablutions for just one day. And besides, the really important – crucial! – things were all present and correct: warmth and a sufficient number of beds. Plus there was a much-appreciated bonus: the dinner was deliciously divine!





The surrounding scenery at sunrise...

Meanwhile, the mercury hints it's time for some outdoor winter fun...





Wrap up!

The next morning the thermometer was giving a reading approaching -55°C . There was only one thing for it – go for a stroll! And that of course meant wrapping up – extremely well! But how, exactly?...

First things first, next to your skin you need thermals – preferably two sets. Then a good thick fleece jacket. And on top of that – a polar-expedition-standard warm coat, or, alternatively – a thin down-jacket and then another, thick one. Insulated outer trousers, insulated boots. A pair of gloves and a pair of mittens over the top (the mittens – thick; the gloves – not so thick, to be able to take off the mittens and do something with your fingers – for example operate a camera).

Maybe a mid-set of gloves or mittens too; in fact as many as you want or can manage to put on: the extremities always start to feel the cold sooner rather than later, no matter what. Of course, a warm hat. And on top of that – the insulated hood of your outer coat. And don't forget your scarf or Buff/snood to wrap around your neck and lower face (to breathe through). Any parts of the body left exposed (around the eyes mostly) need to be smeared in special ointment, and on your lips – special lip-balm.

Once properly dressed, you should be good to go for that walkabout in -55°C . Just don't think that, no matter how warmly you're dressed, you can stay outdoors for long.

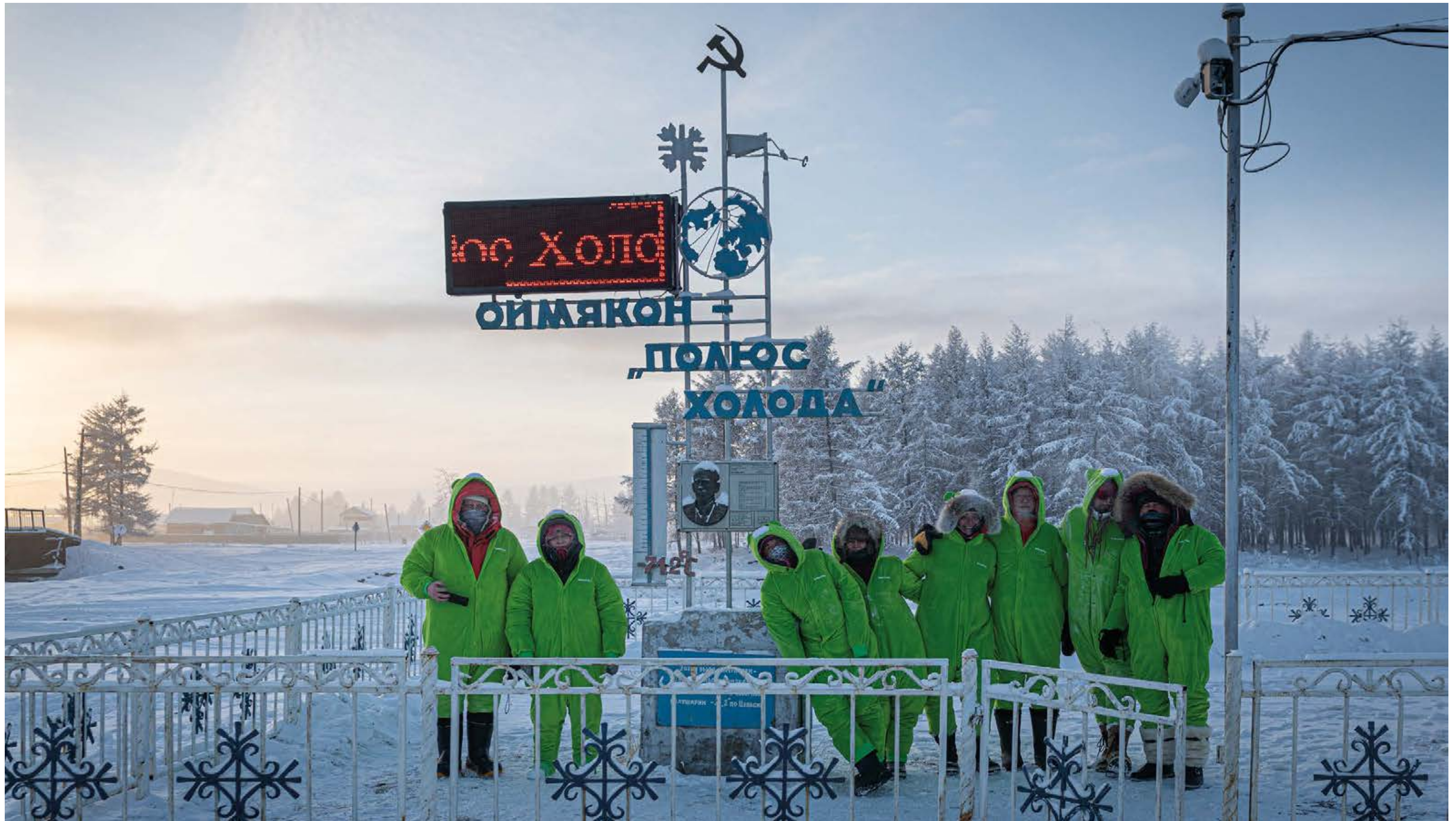
You can't – since the intense cold soon somehow gets through all your layers, as if sucking the warmth out of your body through your clothing.

Also worth bearing in mind: you don't only start to *feel* the cold after a short while; your brain seems to slow down too: you get all cloudy-fuzzy, then some serious lethargy kicks in. I'd read about this phenomenon in books about arctic heroes; here in Oymyakon – I felt it for myself!

And the last word on the cold: do you know what the difference is between -50°C and -20°C ? The same difference between -20°C and $+10^{\circ}\text{C}$! Hold that thought while looking at these pics!...



We walked about (and acted daft) for a short while, then we started to stiffen and feel weird... so before we knew it it was time to head back indoors (after all that effort getting wrapped up!). Meanwhile the mercury had traveled still further south! Apparently the previous night it had gotten as cold as -62°C , but we slept through it. The coldest we experienced for ourselves was -58°C - during a pit-stop around 100km from Oymyakon.



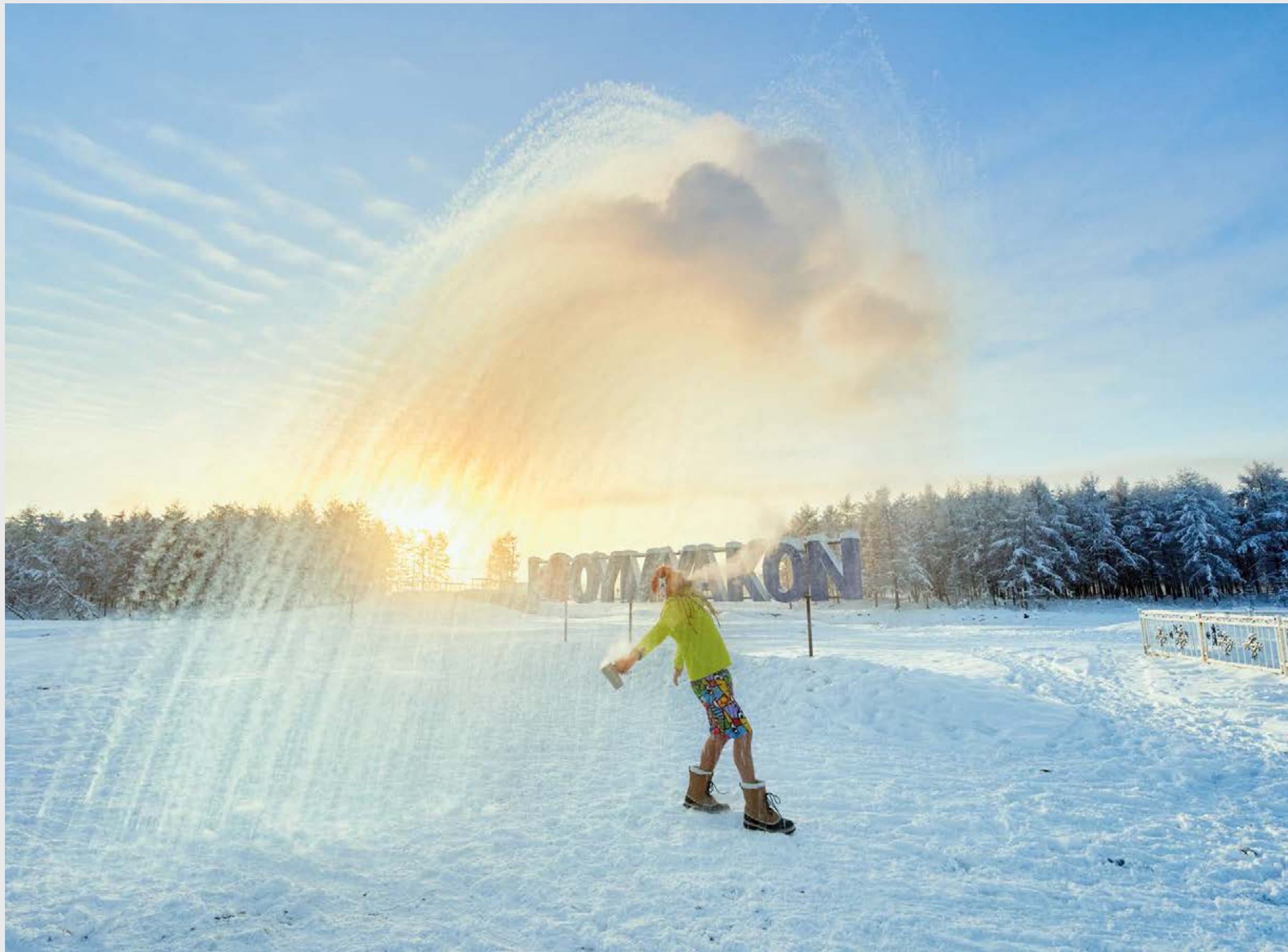
Photography at -50°C

We'd consulted experienced folks in-the-know about photography in extremely cold temperatures before we left on our expedition. The rules are quite straightforward: (i) keep your batteries warm; (ii) don't take kit from the cold into a warm building: the lenses will steam up and possibly crack from too much moisture; (iii) warm your camera up steadily – for example by placing it in a backpack that was also out in the cold; and (iv) make sure your camera doesn't get covered in hoarfrost – if it does it could be curtains for the camera. All good advice, it would appear. One problem though... When the temperature goes below 50 degrees – none of it applies!

When it's that cold the batteries give out in around 15-20 minutes, and that's it: no more photos. And I think this might be why there aren't all that many photos or videos of Oymyakon to be found on the internet! And forget about your smartphones: unglowed hands? No way. And anyway – their batteries shut down within minutes at just -10°C !

Quite what you can do if you want to be out taking decent photos for longer than 15 minutes I don't know. Maybe take three or four cameras, leave them all in a heated car – or an insulated or heated camera bag – and then use one after the other? I guess that could work.





Oymyakon fun and games

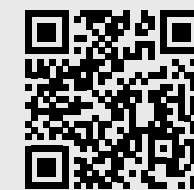
The main Oymyakon “attraction” is filling a cup with boiling water, and then quickly releasing said water in a fan-like motion over your head to observe it instantly freeze!

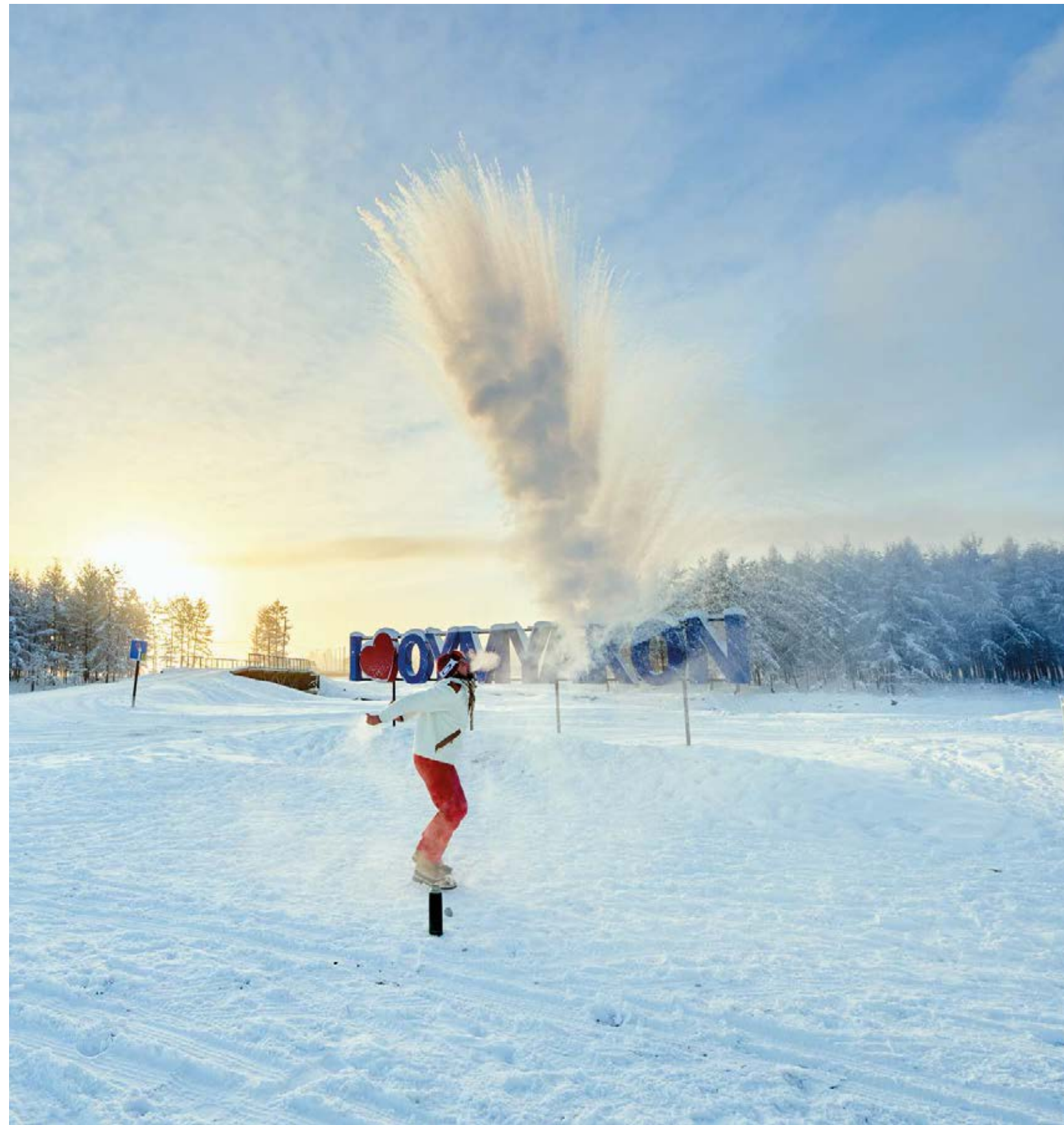
Then there’s pouring boiling water into a pot of instant noodles, driving your plastic fork deep into said noodles to scoop a load thereof, and lifting the fork up slowly: the noodles stand erect in a column before you’ve time to add your sachets of spices and sauces!

Another trick we were told of: instead of using a hammer to knock a nail into some wood, using... a banana (of course!). Alas, we didn’t have any nails with us. Or bananas. Oof. Must remember to pack some next time)...

Indeed, at -50°C and below, many things undergo a transformation regarding their physical properties or customary characteristics. A piece of fruit turns into blob of concrete; metal becomes brittle; synthetic garments become stiff and make crunching sounds if disturbed, and snow underfoot makes similar scrunching sounds – the colder the louder! And it’s all most bizarre, unique, and somewhat disorienting.

Video: Water tricks in Oymyakon





Oymyakon bathing

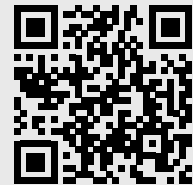
In a stream that comes off the Indigirka river there are hot well springs that never freeze – no matter how crazy cold it gets! Btw: the name Oymyakon means unfrozen water in the Even language.

Taking a dip in these springs is a somewhat extreme undertaking... although, for a mere 5000 rubles (less than a hundred US dollars), you can rent a heated tent in which you can get changed into your swimming costume, take a dip, and then rush back into to warm up and get dressed again.

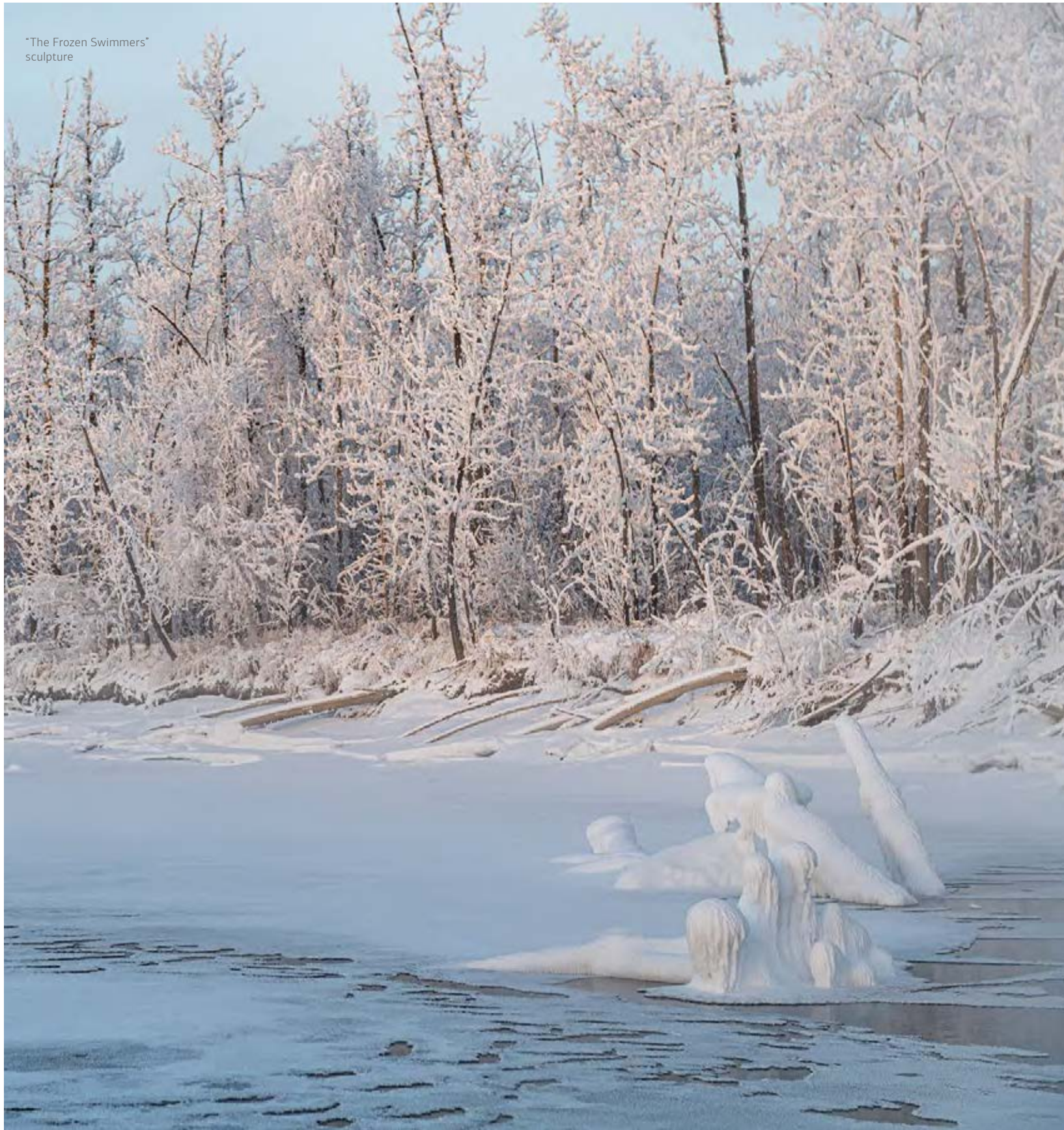
There's one curious difference to this spot of sub-zero bathing compared to the norm. Typically (say, in European Russia, Finland (after a sauna)), it's the water that you plunge into after a stint in the steam that's brutally cold; the air – not so much. Here, the air was -55°C , while the water was... $+4^{\circ}\text{C}$: completely back-to-front! First time I've experienced such a thing.



Video: Extreme winter swimming in the Indigirka



"The Frozen Swimmers"
sculpture



In Yakutia (including in Oymyakon), they rear a very interesting breed of Equus: the Yakutian horse. It's a native, stocky pedigree, and smaller than the horses you're probably accustomed to seeing. But the main thing: it's covered not in short hair but thick fur. But of course; how else would it survive? They're also easily spooked: they run off when strangers approach them.





The Yakut Santa Claus's underground lair

In the village of Tomtor, some 40km southeast of Oymyakon, it was just as cold, but at least our lodgings for the night were more comfortable – plus they featured a banya!

Just outside Tomtor – *inside* the Ebe Khaya mountain, there's the "Museum of Cold", aka the "Ice Residence of [local folklore legend] Hyskhaan, the Yakut Custodian of Cold". That sure sounded like a very cold place to be; however, we soon found out that inside it was "just" -10°C – a full 40 degrees warmer than outside!

What they used to quarry in the mine I never did get to find out – and anyway, the story changes depending on whom you ask. Whatever they mined, it as long ago; fast forward to the early 2000s, and some locals set about seriously sprucing up the place to make it more attractive to tourists. They equipped it with multicolored lighting and various other installations, and have made it really quite something to behold. Well done guys!

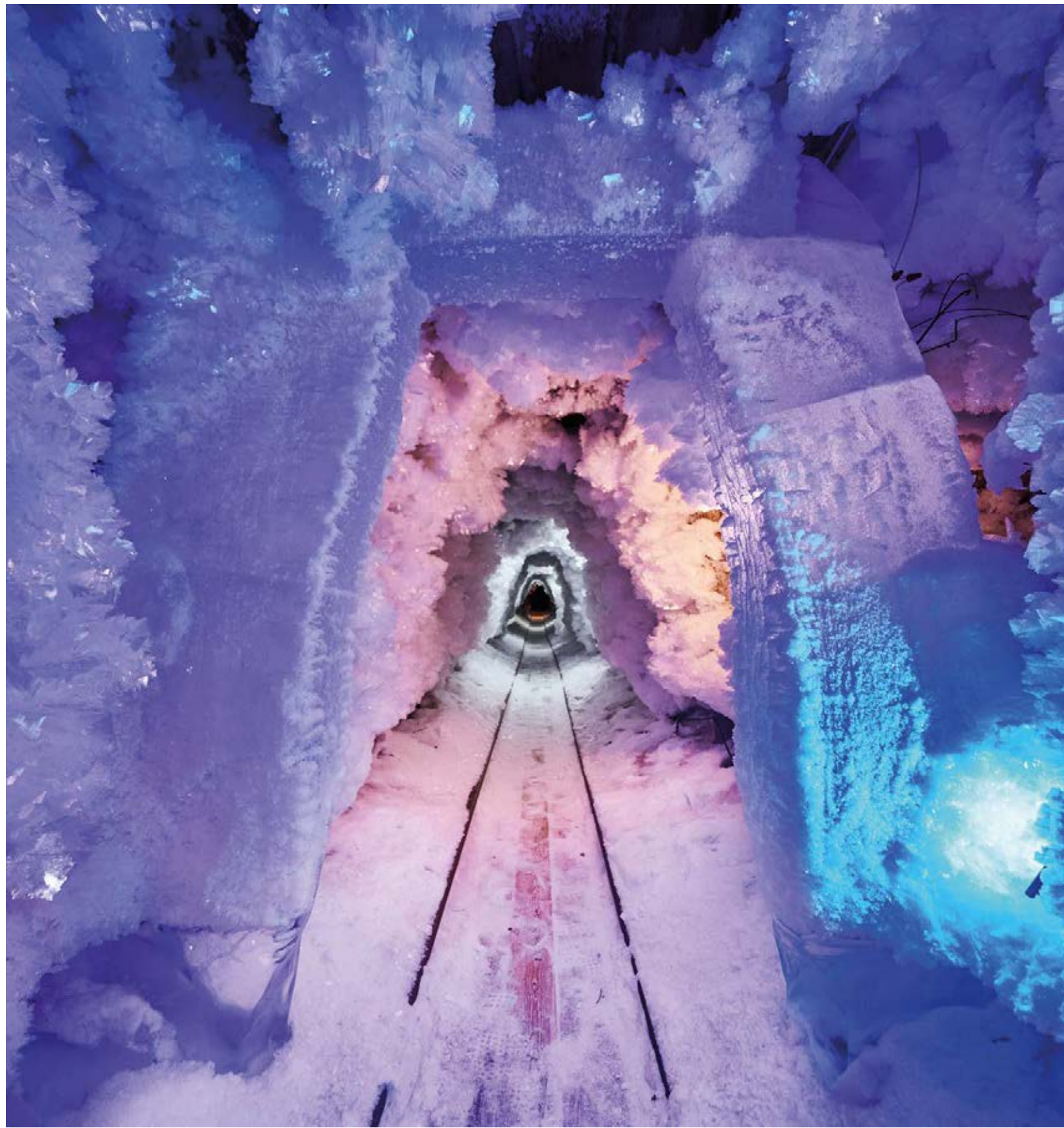
The main tunnel is around a hundred meters long with several shorter tunnels branching off it. All the walls and ceilings are covered in thick layers of hoarfrost, and the nearer you get to the exit, the stodgier – and prettier – those layers of hoarfrost get.

Very nice! The only thing missing – some light piped music to fit the setting (like in the caves in the Jeita Grotto outside Beirut, Lebanon).

Yes – a simply marvelous place! So if you ever find yourself in Tomtor – which I highly recommend you do, of course – make sure to drop by. Just remember to book in advance: it never gets too busy here, so they only open it up when there are guaranteed visitors wanting a look around.

Video: Ebe-Khaya cave in Tomtor, Yakutia





Kolyma food, fuel, and places to stay

So how did we dine on our road-trip? That depended on the caliber of the eating establishment we stopped off at en route – or of the restaurant/café at the place we were staying a night at...

Sometimes our meals were full-on feasts fit for a (portly) king, or, as we say in Russian, where the “table groaned with food” – like in Oymyakon. Other times things were much more spartan. For example, once (in Susuman), no breakfast was served – at all! – in the hotel we were staying at, so we had to make it ourselves: boiled frankfurters and instant noodles!

En route, we’d stop at roadside cafes, and they were all... *acceptable* in terms of comfort. I say acceptable, but let’s face it – any premises with some heat supplied thereto would be acceptable when it’s this cold (~-50°C). Even a barn!

As to the chow served in these eateries... *acceptable* I think is the best way to describe it, too. It was hardly haute cuisine, but it was all edible. And there were no... after-effects. But of course there weren’t: most punters at these cafés are long-distance truck drivers, and serving them food of questionable freshness and quality is dangerous: they come back!





Probably the most famous eatery along the Kolyma Highway is the Cuba café, which, handily, has a filling station next door. Oh my: before even getting out of the car, noticing the trash and abandoned this, that and the other all around it, you clock straight away that this is a bit of a seedy joint.

And, the Cuba connection? There isn't one! Though there are a few Cuban flags up, a connection is more likely with the nearby river Kyubeme.

Inside the café hut it was crowded; it was lunchtime, after all. But apparently it's practically always busy since, it turns out, every single passing vehicle seems to stop here. Why? Simple economics – supply and demand: there's no other café in either direction for around 250 kilometers! And even if a decent snack bar were to open, would it last long? Surely it would be more expensive. Would pricey, say, fresh-ground coffee go down well with the regular clientele of truck drivers? I'm not so sure. I mean, just look at the café's "restroom". If truck drivers can put up with using it when it's below minus-fifty, I guess they'd be just fine with the bare basics in terms of "cuisine").

Regarding the quality of the gasoline – no problems to report. Perhaps in such cold climes there's no difference between bargain-basement/dodgy and super-hi-tech/fancy with all the right additives. Main thing – the cars go. It's probably the same as with the meals at the cafes: if the truckers fuel up on watered-down gasoline (wait – might that then freeze? :0)) – they'll be back sooner or later: mad as hell!

As you can probably guess, filling up with gas when it's so cold out is best done quickly. We'd form a line of cars at a fueling station, and the leader – and accountant – of the expedition would pay the attendant in the kiosk for the full convoy of cars beforehand. Then, one after the other, the cars drive up to the pump, and a passenger from each gets out to do the honors. No problem? There wouldn't have been a problem if the pump guns had latches to enable taking your hand off the trigger. But no latches.

And even with multiple layers of gloves on, grasping –50-degree metal... those poor fingers inside the gloves still froze to numbness. Then the refueler would race back inside the car, and spend several minutes with his hands on the steering wheel – mercifully a heated one).





Closing this digression of daily life on-the-road, a bit about our lodgings of a night...

Main thing: you don't need to take a sleeping bag with you: all hotels were very warm, with sufficient beds and bedding (just don't expect breakfast in all of them:). The rooms were... basic, spartan, but adequate.

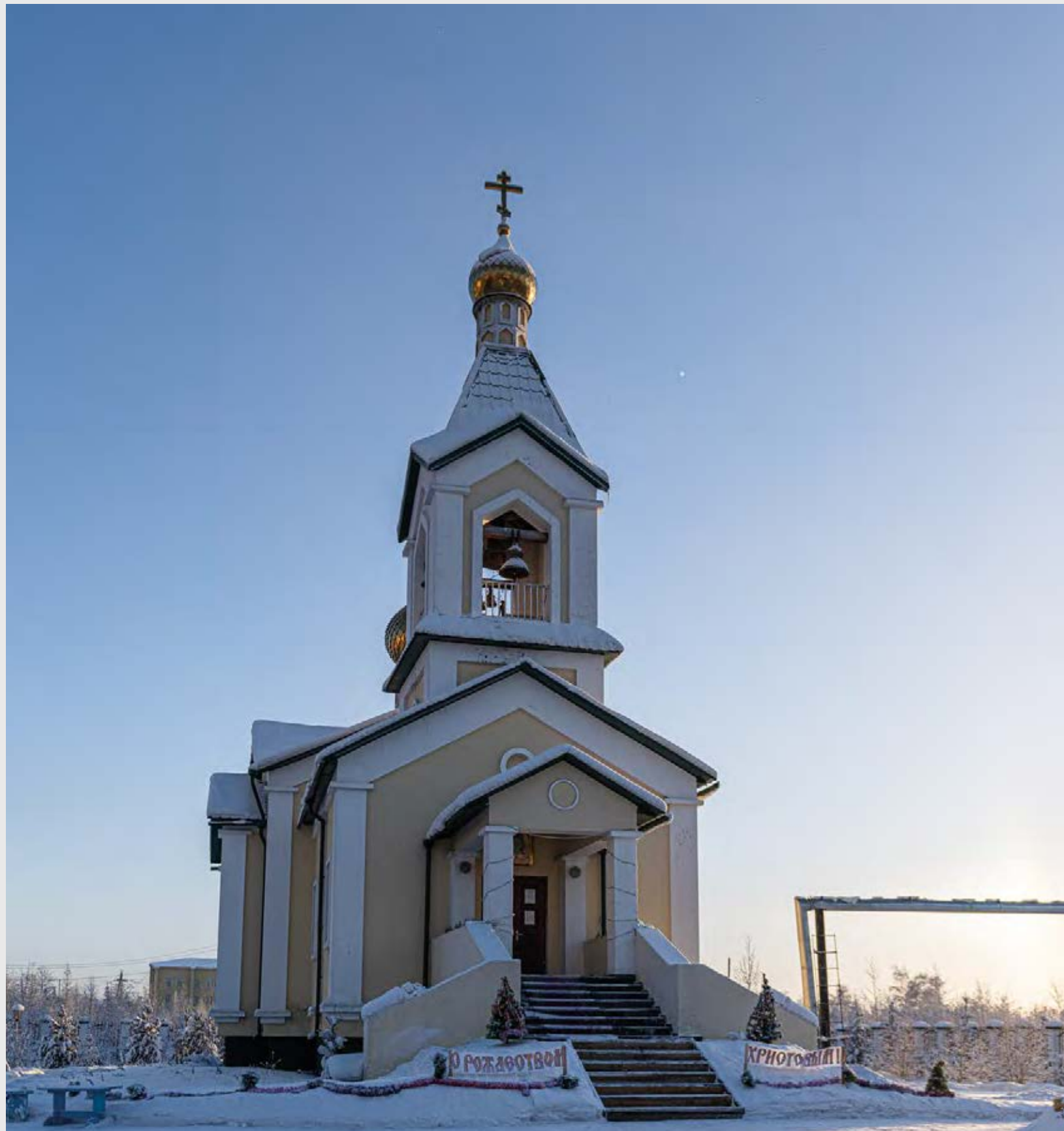
In Susuman and Ust-Nera the hotels were in regular residential apartment blocks. In Khandyga we rented apartments – in an old three-story (wooden!) building; no five-stars here, and everything kinda old and tired, but – like all our

lodgings on the expedition – the apartments were very clean and (once more!) warm. Another thing we didn't have to worry about but had feared we might: there was piping-hot, high-pressure running water everywhere we stayed – no matter how cold it was outside. So, if ever contemplating a Kolyma road-trip yourself, don't think you'll be slumming it without the basic modern necessities: there's simply nothing to worry about on that count!



Yana, Indigirka, Kolyma. Gulag country.

One of the main populated centers along the Kolyma Highway is the small town of Khandyga. We stayed two nights here – and during our full day there we headed out away from Kolyma for a drive along the Yana Highway. Why? To check out... the ruins of a former Gulag camp. Though uncomfortable, we deemed it a necessary thing to do. A sad page in the history of our country: an unforgivably cruel, off-the-scale dark page – and not just one...



There were a great many “Gulag Archipelago” camps in Yakutia and the Magadan Oblast, but finding what remains of them today is very difficult: the last of the camps were closed and abandoned in the middle of last century, so today there’s almost nothing left of them at all. Still, around 140 kilometers along the Yana road in the direction of the winter road to Verkhoyansk, somehow, a single, lonely barrack has survived – as if frozen in time...



Gulags, though an utterly regrettable phenomenon, will forever remain a part of the history of Russia, and that dark history needs to be studied, learned and remembered. And if it's ever possible to have a look at a genuine item with your own eyes – for example, if you find yourself in a remote corner of frozen Siberia – then you definitely need to do so. For, it's one thing to read a book about the forced labor camps of the Soviet Union – and there are quite a few such books – in warm comfort on the sofa at home, but to go to an actual Gulag camp when it's fifty below zero – that's a different matter altogether.

Prisoners basically lived like this: in winter it was -50°C and below; in summer it was hot and swarming with mosquitos and gnats, plus there were assorted other inhumane "peculiarities" of camp life. Around the barrack – two rows of barbed wire fencing. But it's not clear why it was needed – where would a potential escapee possibly go? To the neighboring camp? There was a guard tower too, despite also not being needed, which, incidentally, is still mostly intact today.

The camp is situated in as uncomfortable a location as possible: in narrow valley around a stream where in winter there's no direct sunshine – ever: the inmates only saw some sun atop the surrounding mountains.



Also preserved quite well is what remains of a large oven. Since the prisoners constructed roads, it seems they needed a kiln to heat/burn/melt some kind of road-building materials. The camp is probably some 70-80 years old. It looks like it was abandoned in a hurry – everything just dropped and left as-is. And the high-degree of preservation is perhaps down to the extreme conditions here; that, and its being so far away from anywhere – mostly untouched by man down the decades...

We didn't see any other remains of Gulag camps as there's not much information on where they are/were. Not that we really needed to see any more: one camp was enough. It's hard to imagine (but, while there, we sure did try) how folks managed to live in such conditions. And when you think that many of the inmates had done absolutely nothing wrong – there on trumped-up charges or purely political articles of the criminal code of the USSR. Still, no matter how uneasy it makes one, I repeat: it's a part of Russian history, and it needs to be acknowledged and remembered. I sure remember our visit – crystal clear – and won't ever forget it. Also, curiously, after visiting the camp, we all agreed that we started to perceive the bleak, thoroughly-frozen winter-wilderness surroundings in an entirely different way...

Magadan

Quick rewind – back to the city where we began our road trip. Magadan. Maybe you’ve heard of it; maybe not. If you have, but haven’t been, how do you imagine it?

I think answers like “remote”, “cold”, “I know the name, but I’m still not sure quite where it is!” would be popular. Before this – my first – visit to the city, my answers would have been “middle of nowhere”, “freezing cold” and “over there in the corner of a world map – almost as far as Alaska”. But now I’ve visited the city I know how things really are...

First, of course, you need to get there. From Moscow it’s seven hours on a plane – eight time zones away! Yes, Russia is enormous (the world’s largest country); but you knew that).

Coming in to land, you look down out the window and it’s frozen mountainous landscapes you see, with the city finally appearing, wedged in-between the mountains by the sea.

The city itself, at least downtown, was – to me surprisingly – cheerful. The buildings along the central streets appear to all be in good condition and with a new lick of paint. In a word: encouraging. And things are looking good not just along the central streets; behind our hotel there was a large yard with a kindergarten in the middle of it and everything looked just as well-maintained, brightly-painted and cheery. There’s a central park (which we didn’t have time to walk around), several squares, and a long pedestrianized street (along which were dotted dozens of ice sculptures).

Even the demographics are similarly optimistic, having stabilized since 2002 at around 90,000.





Magadan and the Soviet Gold Rush

Magadan was founded thanks to gold: once discovered – the initial settlement was founded. At first it was just a few tents – like here in the pic. Next came a fuller camp, then the first buildings, then the port, then more housing, roads and other infrastructure... > town... > city!

But in order to build up a city in such remote and wholly uncomfortable conditions, you need a large, motivated workforce. Enter... the gold rush – Soviet style – based on forced labor. Communist with a capital C. Ruthless, merciless...

To find out how they extracted gold, how much there was in the ground, how much they mined, and what the prisoners' working conditions were like, there's a museum all about the early days of Magadan and the camps. Road building – on permafrost – is also covered in the museum, and that includes the unique methods and technologies that were used, since ordinary ones were useless. For example, roads here swell, so an ordinarily-constructed one would be broken up in no time at all; therefore, the first layer of a road on permafrost is made out of wood (as in the pic over the page)!

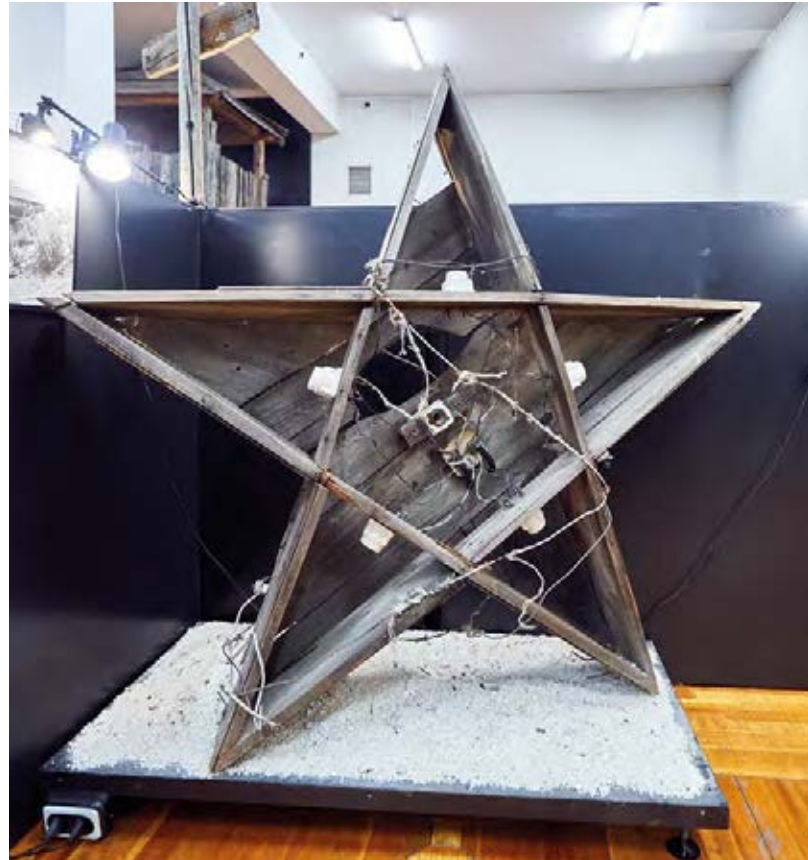


СЕРГЕЙ ВАСИЛЬЕВИЧ СЕРГЕЕВ
На Ижорском заводе, 1937 г.
Холст, масло

НА ИЖОРУ ЗАКОНЕ

The section of the museum all about the camps that built the Kolyma Highway is simply must-visit. The tools the camp inmates would use to pound the ground are on show, as are other artifacts and tales that convey their daily struggles and the wickedness of the guards.

Also exhibited is artwork of former inmates, who somehow found the time for artistic creativity – despite and in addition to the grueling daily toil...





Magadan today; in winter, that is...



Another must-see in Magadan is the Mask of Sorrow. On the rocks – symbols of the various religions of the inmates of the Kolyma camps: Catholic and Orthodox crosses, Islamic half-moons, the Star of David...

Curiously, the word “Restoration” is inscribed on one of rocks. Locals joke that it could mean that they’ll be remodeling the installation to feature a hammer and sickle [given the popular nostalgia of late of all things СССР]. I just hope our country has learned its lesson once and for all.



Nagaev Bay freezes over completely in winter (as does much of the rest of the Sea of Okhotsk in which it sits), and stays frozen until May or June!

On the shore looking out to the bay stands this here mammoth sculpture – the Time Monument – made out of six tons of scrap metal! “Atmospheric” is what I thought when I first saw it. It does look rather imposing against the backdrop of severe, frozen landscapes.

It’s said that you need to hold the mammoth’s tail for good luck or to make a wish. Some tourists then, in their wisdom, decide to pull off some of the poor mammoth’s “fur” as a memento to take home with them. I wonder if that will bring bad luck? Perhaps it should. Anyway, because of these thieves, the mammoth has to have a fur transplant occasionally. Ouch. Maybe that’s why he looks so sad?...

Nearby – another mammal-themed installation: a killer whale made out of stones within a frame.





When we first arrived in Magadan it wasn't all that cold – relatively (merely -15°C). This is the norm for winter, since Magadan is by the Sea of Okhotsk, which, though it's no Mediterranean, all the same acts as protection for the city against the mercury going down to -40°C .

But once we'd covered just a short distance from the city heading north, the security blanket that is the Sea of Okhotsk started to be pulled away as we entered an altogether "other" world. The temperatures outside (not inside the cars; phew) dropped steadily – the thermometers going down past -30°C , and then faster – further and further down. We were lucky the first day: it never went below -40°C .

The Kolyma Highway is 2032 kilometers long, and ends (for us – started) in Magadan (the other end is on the bank of the Lena River opposite the city of Yakutsk). Magadan's inhabitants refer to the Highway as the "longest street in the world", since it starts out as the city's main street – Lenin Prospect – and keeps on going for the rest of those 2000+ kilometers.

And that's about all on Magadan. Early morning, simple breakfast, into the motors, and off we set! Ahead of us lay 12,000 kilometers all the way to Moscow (taking into account occasional additional drives on roads that fork off the main route).

A completely white city

The last stretch of the Kolyma Highway – from Khandyga to Yakutsk – on day seven of our Magadan-to-Moscow road trip was as beautiful as on the other days – but in a different way...

As we were approaching Yakutsk itself (at night) a suspiciously thick fog (suspicious because it looked more like smoke!) descended and brought visibility down to a few meters. And when we got caught behind an old diesel bus visibility went down to almost zero! Strange was the effect, but still beautiful.

And talking of diesel... Turns out it could have been one of the reasons for the pea-souper. Some of my fellow travelers told me how the smog could be unspent diesel oil: below minus-fifty, in old and worn-out vehicle engines, diesel has trouble doing what it's meant to – ignite fully.

So it seemed that the whole city had a thick, icy natural fog upon it, complemented by a thick diesel fog. Doesn't sound ideal at all. All the same, like I say – still beautiful. But you can't see the front-end of the car hood for it! However, amazingly, modern digital cameras do a much better job of seeing through such haze than does the naked human eye; the result – these here pics!

Yakutsk is truly unique since, well, where else do you get a large city (with a population of more than 300,000) that doesn't even blink at -60°C ? And where else does it get so bitterly cold in winter, yet so swelteringly hot in summer – $+40^{\circ}\text{C}$?! Like I say: unique. And extraordinarily tough! How's that slogan about the Lone Star State go? "Don't mess with Texas"? Surely you should never mess with Yakutsk either!





When we arrived in Yakutsk the mercury showed -50°C – around about the average temperature for January! No matter: time for walkies!... And the first impressions? A city that's completely white – with literally everything coated in hoarfrost.

Minus fifty! And there are folks out for a stroll to the shops! There are no traffic jams, but there are still plenty of cars on the roads. Life just goes on!

Another feature that sets the city apart – the masses of elevated cables everywhere. Since there's permafrost here, laying cables underground is tricky and expensive; so up they're hauled, suspended between poles. Occasionally, though there's no wind, a cable will (mysteriously?) start to sway (under the weight of the ever-increasing volume of hoarfrost, I reckon), and shed its load of hoarfrost, and the movement from this has a domino effect on the other cables, which one by one release their hoarfrost too. *Yakutsk hoarfrost hypnosis*. Surely that's a thing?...

We'd walked around pretty much all of downtown Yakutsk, yet this was the only building where you could see that it's constructed on stilts (all other buildings had this feature covered up). Because of the permafrost, any foundations sooner or later start to shift, so all buildings are constructed on stilts as a technical solution (exactly how this helps I didn't catch, but clearly it does: why else would they go to all that trouble?).



Not only buildings' foundations, but cars get special Yakutskian treatment too: when parked up they put on a special thermal coat! And they're referred to – warmly – as “portable Natasha garages”! When it's time for a drive, off comes Natasha and onto the back seat or roof or into the trunk she goes!



Many a diamond, gold nugget, and mammoth tusk – in the museums of Yakutsk

We had a day to fill in the white city, and fill it we did – with plenty of assorted brief visits to wholly interesting and rather unique places of interest (one place was truly unique – the mammoth museum: so unique it's probably the only one of its kind in the world).

First up, Yakutskian bling!...

The Treasury of Yakutia is a collection of precious stones, precious minerals, precious metals, and precious... mammoth tusks, all of which were extracted on the territory of the republic. The exposition isn't too big – just three or four rooms – but you can spend a good hour here, maybe more.



Next up on our tour of Yakutsk's museums: the mammoth museum.

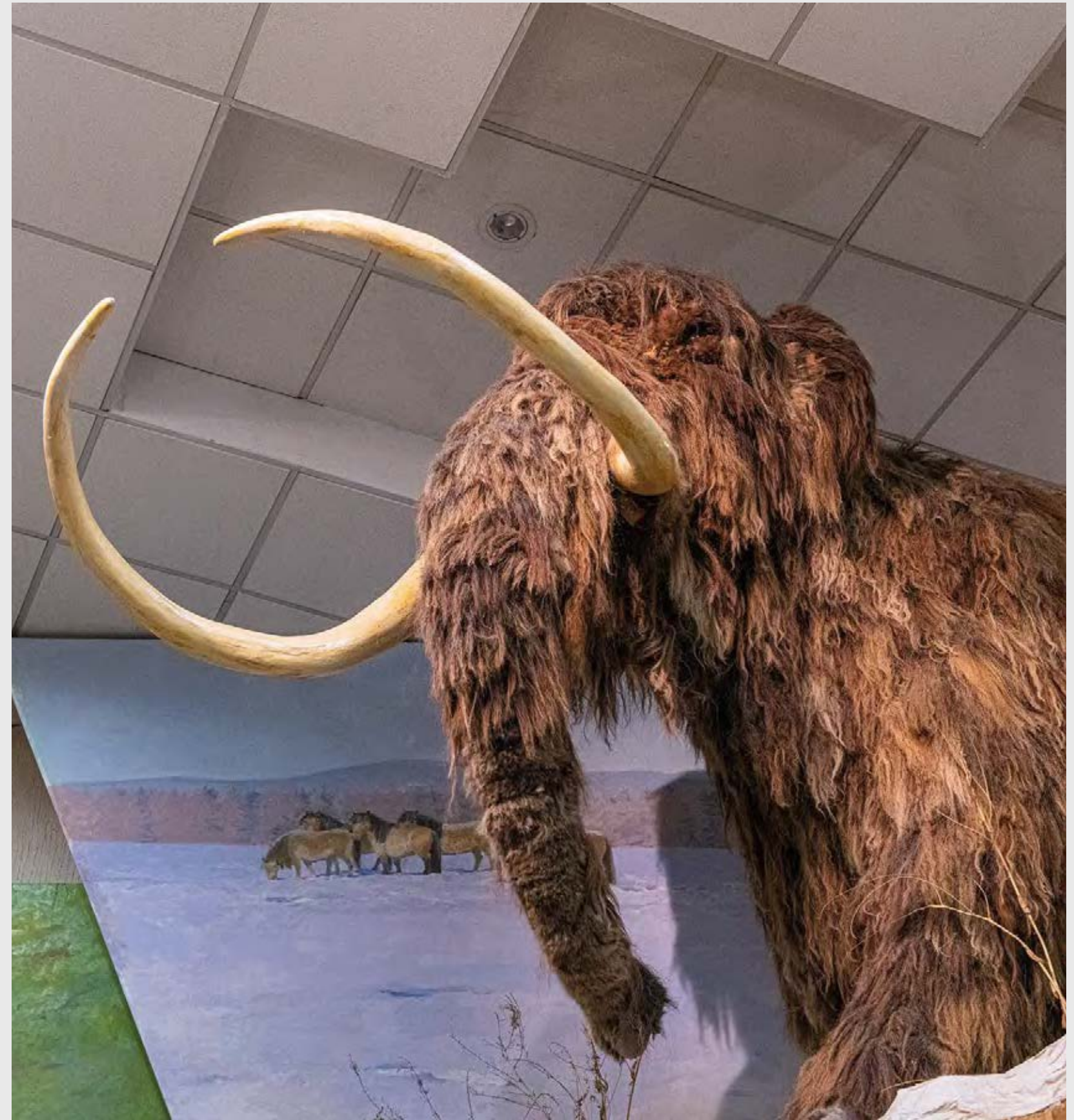
The mammoth museum (despite its name!) is also quite small – but well worthy of a visit; that is – if it's open: when we were there it was being overhauled and the expositions were being restored, so formally the museum was closed. But we smiled and asked politely)...

Not only do they exhibit mammoths here, they also study them. And they... experiment on them too. The latest experiment is really something (are you sat down?). They plan to reanimate mammoth DNA, insert it into an elephant's egg cells, place those egg cells inside the ovaries of a shelephant, and months later – out pops a baby... mammoth! At least, that's the plan.

Of course it's by no means as simple as that, so the museum's working with both Japanese and Korean scientists to help them pull it off. Things aren't going so great so far, but they're persevering. Well good luck to them!

Mammoths once roamed here in such quantities that, today, the (legal) extraction of their fossilized tusks has reached mammoth proportions: 30, 60 or 100 tons of tusks (depending on whom you ask) are dug up each year (how many tons are extracted illegally is hard to tell). And sometimes it's not just tusks that are found, but also mummified mammoths with hide and fur intact. Not all such mummies are retrievable though: they rot quickly.

But some do make it back to the museum so the biologists can try extract some DNA...





Continuing our Yakutsk excursion, we head on over to the Melnikov Permafrost Institute, specifically – its main laboratory, which is underground (which makes sense for an institute that’s all about studying the subsoil).

The temperature in the underground lab is always – all-year-round! – approximately $-10-11^{\circ}\text{C}$.

Asked if we could leave an engraving on the walls, the guide told us we could go ahead; any etchings would soon disappear anyway. Petrovich duly did the honors.

When in Yakutsk, besides after the museums and institutes, a drive over on the frozen Lena is simply a must. If you're on a road trip heading west, you'll be taking the winter road anyway: the "road" on the river links the city up to the Lena Highway, which in turn winds southward some 1100km until it meets the Amur Highway, just above the border with China.

Why it is that the main road is on one side of the river, while Yakutsk is on the other is a bit of a historical ~~mystery~~ curiosity. A quick scan of the internet tells me that the city was founded in 1632, and the Cossacks' first ostrog (fortress) was built on the "correct" bank of the Lena. Then, 10 years later, for some reason the ostrog was transferred to the other bank – where it still stands today. It seems likely that the reason was strategic-defensive: back then there were frequent skirmishes with natives, and there's not much better protection for a settlement than a wide (2km+!) body of water (such as the river Lena). But that still doesn't

quite explain why 300 years later the road was built on the other side. But I digress. Anyway, still today there's no bridge that crosses the Lena at Yakutsk, but in winter there's the "winter road" you can take across the frozen river. There have been plans for construction of a bridge, but in these conditions – what with the permafrost (and, thus, perma-unstable) ground, the extreme cold, and the significant girth of the Lena – they've kept being put off.

But it seems folks have gotten used to it; they've had to! There are ferries in summer, and in the winter there's the just-mentioned winter road. However, every spring – when the ice starts breaking up (so no driving thereupon), and also every fall – when it starts to ice over but is still not strong enough to support vehicles (but also too icy for the ferries to cope with), that's it: no crossings possible at all! Apart from in a helicopter. But that's hardly an accessible mode of transportation now is it?

The winter road over the frozen Lena is really something – especially because it doesn't take the shortest route across; it lasts a full 17 kilometers (following the route the ferries take in the summer, I think), it has two lanes going in each direction, and it's even signposted! Just like a real highway – but on a frozen river!





On the eastern bank of the Lena there's a rail terminal. The railroad used to end in Neryungri, but they laid the rest – all 800km of it – up to Yakutsk in the 2000s. Good job! Despite the perma-difficulties! And they built it very “modestly” too – I don't recall any deserved fanfare when it was opened; but then again, maybe I was in Antarctica or some such.

Some 200km from Yakutsk are located among the most magnificent and beautiful geological installations in the whole of Russia – the Lena Pillars. Unique – check. Grandiose – check. Must-see – check! A long (~250km!) line of huge stone “fingers” (~200 meters in height) sticking up out of the ground along the eastern bank of the river Lena.

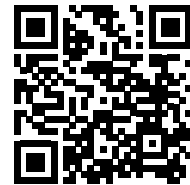
The view of the Lena – in all its girthy glory (three kilometers wide!) – from the Pillars is simply marvelous. But that view comes at a price: you nearly go full-on Jack-Nicholson-in-the-final-scene-of-The-Shining! Up until this walkabout we’d been out in -50°C temperatures for an hour or hour-and-a-half, tops. Today we were out in the cold for much longer. In a word: ouch! We felt the bitter cold most while sat on sledges that were towed by a snowmobile across the frozen Lena. We were only on the sledges for the three kilometers breadth of the river, but we were all covered in hoarfrost by the time we reached the foot of the pillars. Brrrrrrr!

As I didn’t want to repeat that, I decided to walk on the way back. And I made it! Woah! From one bank of the Lena to the other – on foot! It got a bit hairy in the middle of the river – what with the big clumps of ice I had to slalom around – and then more than a little scary when I noticed a few cracks in the ice (!) that had been made under the weight of the fallen snow, but at least I wasn’t Jack Nicholson!

The Lena Pillars in any season are oh-my-grandiose, but I have to say that in winter they’re a little bit less so. Because most everything is covered in whiteness, the pillars are kinda camouflaged in the not-too-far distance, plus the height of the cliffs somehow appears less striking. The ideal way to view them – in summer, from a helicopter!



Video: Full day dash-cam recording: Lena Pillars





Survival secrets

What I've been asked the most about our road trip was how we – mere Moscow “office plankton” – managed to survive in such extraordinarily cold climatic conditions every day. Simple: we dressed appropriately for the extreme cold. But what actually is “dressing properly” for Yakutia's -50°C temperatures? Well, though I've already briefly mentioned how we dressed to be out in the cold (in Oymyakon), here's a bit more detail.

So, where shall I start? Logically, I guess – from the inner-most garments: **underwear!** Actually, this is one type of garment that you can select from your regular, day-to-day “civvies” in your underwear drawer: they don't need to be special in any way. Most all the other items of clothing – listed below – need to be of the “special” kind...

First up – not underwear (this can be your regular undergarments) – **base-layer pants and tops.** You need at least three of each – from thin through to thick. Depending on the temperatures outside – choose which accordingly, but if it's -60 – wear all three!

What comes next after those base layers? Down below – **Socks...** A bit like the base layering, your socks should be of varying thicknesses. You don't need too many: I think I took six pairs but only used three. So take five pairs: they don't take up much room anyway.

After socks... **outer-layer pants.** These need to be windproof and very warm (who knew?!).

Over the top of the socks goes **footwear** – a critical sartorial consideration in Yakutia if you plan to spend more than a few minutes outside. Like the foregoing, you'll need a few different types... **Regular sneakers:** these are for the flights there and back, and for milling about the hotels you stay at. **Flip-flops:** These too are for back at the hotel of course. Nice to slip them on after a long day on the road: aaaaah). **Proper winter boots:** for driving and for short walks when it's no colder than -50°C out. If it is colder,

don't stay out in that cold in these boots for more than an hour. **High fur boots,** or some special **insulated arctic boots:** these are for longer walks (up to several hours) and/or when it's super cold and windy, or when you'll be sat (not moving) out in the cold for a while, for example on a sledge behind a snowmobile. Without these ultra-warm boots you could easily get frostbite in your feet.

Footwear sorted – back to clothing: after the various thermal base-layer garments, what's next?... A good, warm **fleece.** Very practical, very cozy. And if it's really cold, add on top of the fleece a thin, light, warm, dry, **down-filled jacket.**

For the neck – a scarf or a Buff/snoody; the latter can act as a bandana-balaclava too so is the best choice. Btw: two Buffs beat one.

Next – **hat.** The regular woolly hat you wear in winter normally will be fine. But here's the thing: on its own it may not be warm enough; so you need to put on under it one of your Buffs – probably a thick one.

Moving on... to – **special face cream and lip balm!** Ok, these are hardly clothing, but they're no less important. See, you've wrapped up warm your body, head, most of your face, your hands, feet... everything – but not the small section of your face around your eyes and mouth. Enter special cream and balm – special in that they contain zero water in their composition, for obvious reasons.

Ok, nearing the end now. Next up: **outer coat** – or **outer coats.** It goes without saying – your coat needs to be a good one: windproof, very warm, and with a good hood and large pockets – big enough for your hands in their clown oversized mega-warm gloves (see below) to fit in. I took with me two coats, and wore both at different times. One – a down-filled one, which I wore in the car, and a more substantial – polar-rated – one for the longer walkabouts.

What else? Of course – **gloves/mittens.** Already mentioned. Both thin gloves and thick mittens advised. Whatever you do – don't take skiing gloves. Take thin fabric gloves in which you're able to use your fingers as the Lord meant – for pressing things like the buttons on your camera – and also some super thick mittens for the mega-cold, which go over the top of the thin gloves. You can whip the mittens off occasionally to operate your camera then quickly put them back on again.

“So, that's it?” you're thinking? Actually, there's more... We could now put all these warm clothes on and go for a walk. Sure – but only if the sun's shining and there's no wind. If there is a wind up, the above-listed clothing items (and creams) would be insufficient! You'd need to get even more well-wrapped-up! Here's how:

First, you don a full balaclava (not a mere Buff) – providing maximal protection of head, face, neck; and on top of that – some skiing goggles. Why the goggles? Because when it's -50°C or lower the icy wind will literally freeze your eyes up practically straight away! So yes, after putting on all the above-listed, you add the balaclava and goggles and then you should be good to go, at least for a while – if you insist on going walkabout when there's a gale blowing).

So there you have it folks: now you know how to survive a windy -50°C or below. See, there's nothing to be afraid of! So get yourselves to the world of extreme cold!..

Video: Proper clothes for extreme cold in Yakutsk





Next up were 1200 kilometers on the Lena Highway heading south (passing through the towns of Neryungri and Tynda) until it meets, at the village of Never, the Amur Highway (which skirts southern Russia near the border with China and Mongolia, being a stretch of the west-to-east Moscow-Vladivostok route). At Never it's a right turn to head west toward the Urals and then Moscow.

Both the Lena and Amur highways are just as magically awesome to drive on as Kolyma. The road to and around Lake Baikal – also. But, thereafter – up to and then after the Urals – things start to go downhill in terms of awesomeness: there's more traffic – though the roads are faster so less is seen of the surroundings, plus the views are hardly spectacular and somewhat boring compared to what we'd been spoiled with earlier on the first leg of the expedition.

BAM – been there, touched it, need the t-shirt

Meanwhile, still on the Lena Highway – we stop off in the town of Tynda, informally referred to as the “Capital of BAM”, BAM being the Baikal-Amur Mainline – a long Siberian railroad that runs almost parallel to the famed Trans-Siberian Railroad. The outside temperature here – a mere -31°C. Soon we’ll be in shorts and sandals!...

BAM may not be well-known outside Russia, but inside – especially for my generation, which grew up in the 1970s – it sure is. I was too young to join up for service with a Komsomol Student Construction Brigade in building it, but that didn’t stop me hearing about the impressive engineering feats – Brezhnev called it the “construction project of the century” – involved in

its being built for years on the radio and TV. And I must say, I never thought I’d ever visit the place. But here I was! And I just had to have a feel of the track itself: just so I can say I’ve done so!

Of course, there had to be a BAM museum here, and of course – we checked it out, but I have to say I was a bit underwhelmed. I would have liked to have seen details of the techniques and technologies used to construct a railroad on permafrost (by far no easy engineering feat), and about how they built the bridges and tunnels. Alas, there’s mostly just a bit of general history.

The museum does contain exhibits that may be interesting to folks who took part in the

construction – like jubilee keys, commemorative golden rail ties, and assorted other memorabilia and trophies, but to the briefly passing tourist – not so much.

I’d have liked there to be some exhibits and information on BAM’s Severomuysky Tunnel, which took a full 26 years to build! And the Chortov Most – the Devil’s Bridge – whose design is most unusual for BAM, and indeed the whole of Russia (and probably the world). Yes, I’d have liked more on these civil engineering behemoths; then I’d have perused for longer.

But we needed to be off anyway...



Thank you Tynda! Museum – done; BAM – touched; and we were off – back on the road...



After around 150km we saw a sign for a turning to a village two kilometers from the highway named Yerofey Pavlovich, named after Yerofey Pavlovich Khabarov, the 17th century Russian explorer. Somewhat tickled by this utterly unpretentious approach to the naming of a village (not Yerofeygrad, not Yerofeysk, not Khabarovsk (there already was and still is one of those) but simply Yerofey Pavlovich!), we unanimously decided we simply had to make a pitstop there. Turned out the sole reason for the village being founded was to serve the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Accordingly, its station is a beaut.



Photographic evidence: just in case someone doesn't believe I've actually touched BAM!





900km over the Amur waves to Chita

Just like the Lena, the Amur Highway is another good solid road – despite the potential for its being a lot worse (remote, extreme climate, permafrost). There's also hardly any traffic and hardly any populated settlements along it either – maybe one every hundred kilometers or so.

The only unpleasantness: the “Amur waves” in the asphalt, formed by the permafrost. Kind of ripples. And they can get quite high, so you have to slow down to ~50km/h so as not to be jolted around (and maybe wreck the suspension – or your spine). Still, at least they're visible: either their height is discernable against the crash barriers (where there are some), they're warned of on signposts, or they can be expected when plenty of truck skid-marks suddenly appear just before them.

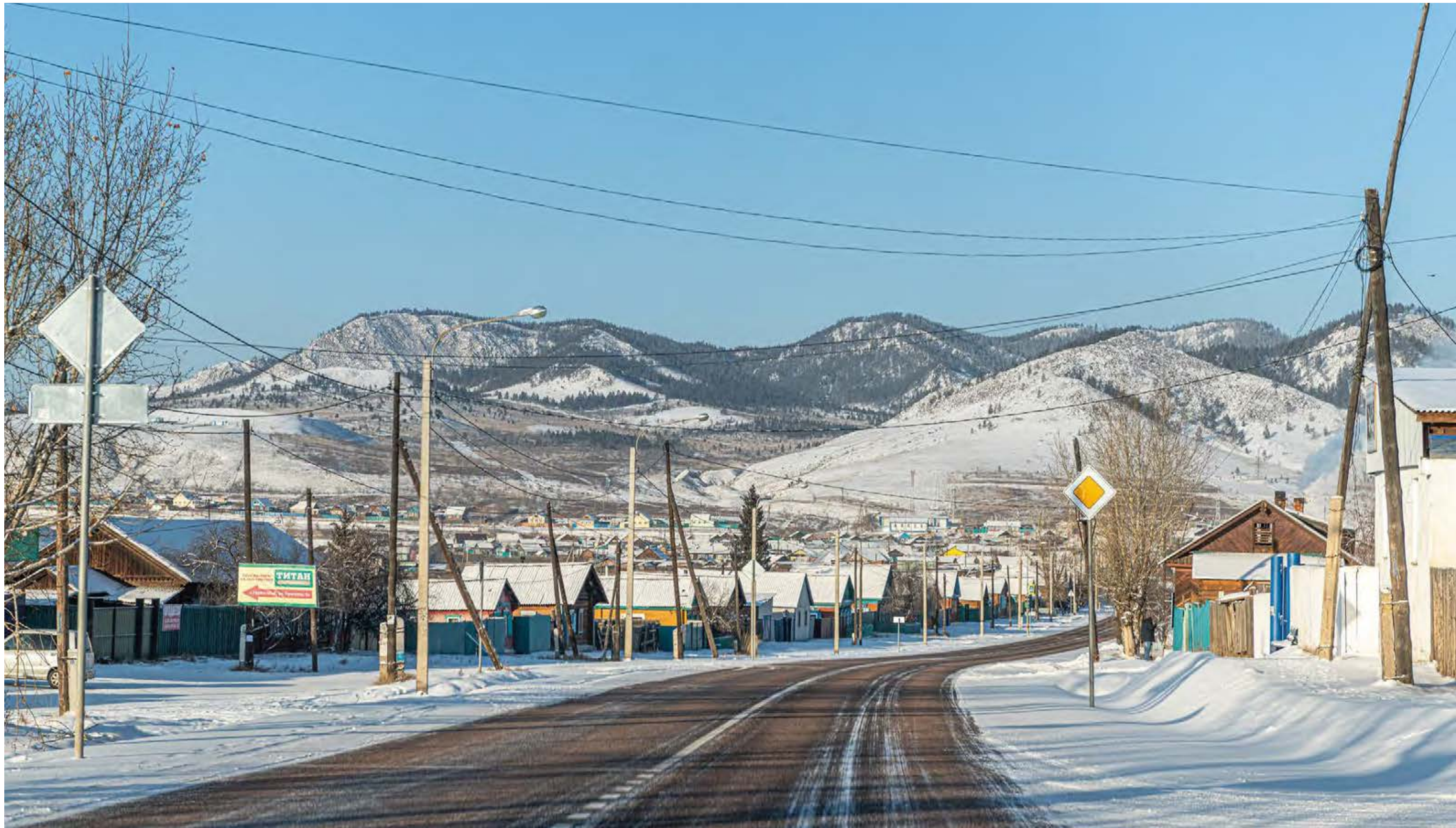
Video: full day dashcam recording:
Uyut to Chita



900km to Chita

Heading to Chita, we notice a change in the surroundings: hitherto there'd been no pine forests at all; now – plenty. All the way – beautiful panoramas. Other vehicles start appearing around 300km from Chita, as do villages...





By now it's settlement after settlement – mostly with Buryat names. And nearer Ulan-Ude – the capital of the Republic of Buryatia – there appear the Old Ritualist (Siberian Orthodox) villages too.

Video: Full day dashcam recording:
Chita to Ulan-Ude



Lake Baikal: half-way between Magadan and Moscow

Somewhere around the town of Baikalsk on the southern shore of Lake Baikal is the mid-way point between Magadan and Moscow: Magadan to Moscow – 10,000 kilometers; Magadan to Baikalsk – 5000km.

The Baikal Highway is typically smooth and mostly straight – just like most highways in this part of the world; the views all around – outstanding, and the drifting snow on the road – spookily stunning.





The Baikal Highway skirts the southern end of the lake for a good 200 kilometers, but because there's dense forest in the way of the lake you practically never see it. Shame! Also, alas, there are no tourist-oriented viewing points with parking lots along the way either: another shame! Especially given that there are some interesting remains of the Trans-Siberian Railroad ferry there.

Over the summer, Lake Baikal accumulates that much heat that it doesn't freeze immediately come the minus temperatures in the fall: it only starts to ice over mid-January – early-February. See for yourself: we were there January 21, and the lake's only just starting to freeze over!



Curiously, the inscription on that wagon is the abbreviation (in Russian) for the Chinese Eastern Railway (from the year 1903)!



Irkutsk

The old city in downtown had been renovated and was looking really rather neat!





After Irkutsk, our next main stop was the large Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk. But since it's a long way – 1100km – we broke the journey up, staying overnight in the town of Taishet, whose main claim to fame is that BAM starts out there.

En route to Taishet, we passed through a quaintly-named town and past its railroad station. The name of both: Zima – Winter!



Video: Zima Station





Though we stayed the night in the wonderful city of Krasnoyarsk, it turned out that the most interesting things to visit aren't in the city but outside it nearby. For example – the Krasnoyarsk Columns: totally must-see...



On the embankment of the river Tom in the city of Kemerovo.

Beautiful, and not too cold – just -40°C!





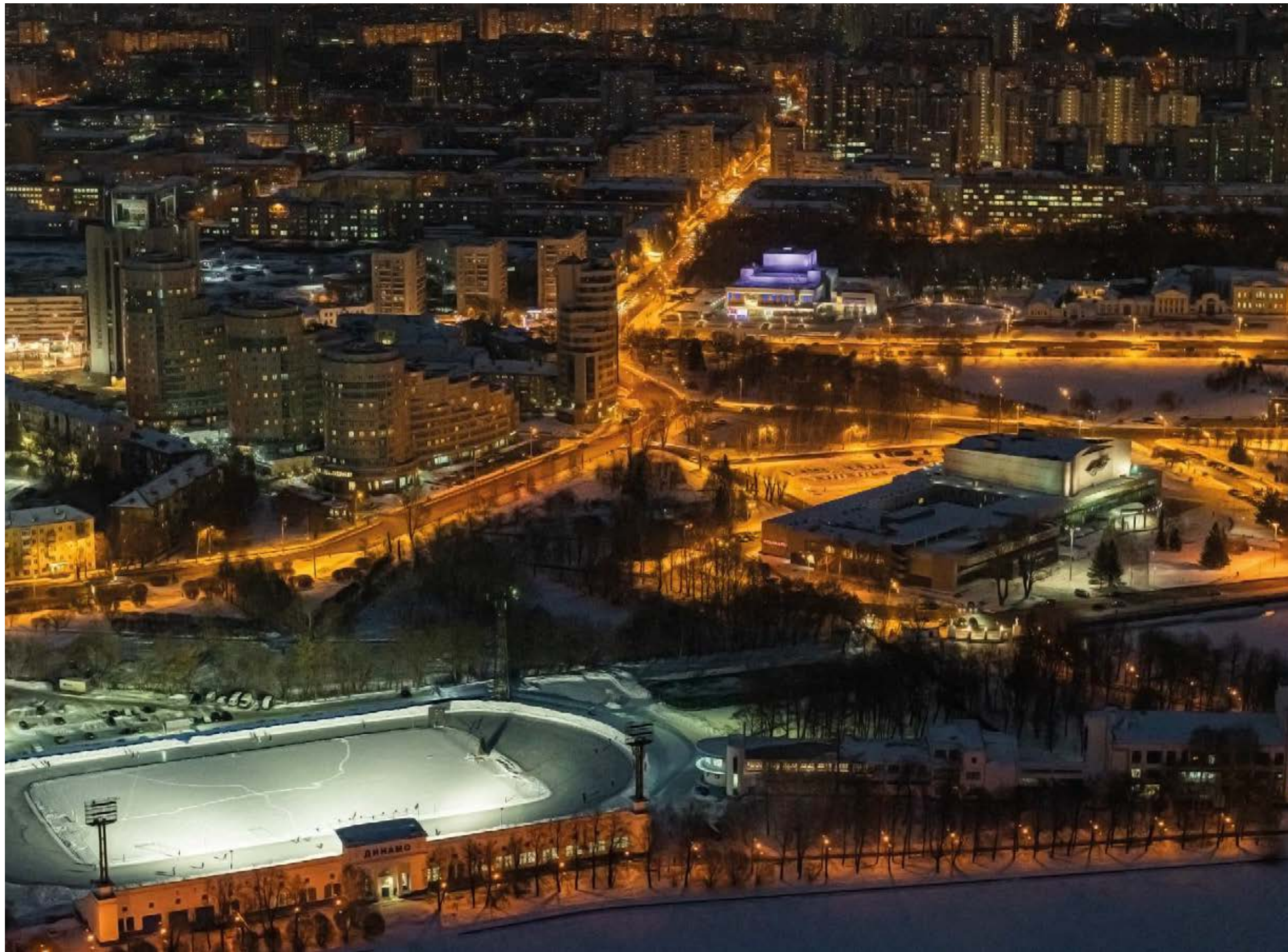
The main thing on the menu for when we were in Ekaterinburg (Russia's fourth-largest city by population, third-largest by area) was a visit to the town just outside it called Verkhnyaya Pishmá – specifically, its Ural Mining and Metallurgical Company and its amazing automobile museum. It's actually less of a museum and more of... an encyclopedia! Painstakingly collected vehicles of all sorts of brands, series, and configurations: from the very earliest cars up to relatively new ones; moreover – all fully renovated, highly polished, and described in great detail. Many vehicles are the genuine articles – including many rarities – while there are also plenty of perfect replicas constructed with the original technologies of times past, out of the original materials, and as per the original design documents. Some of them even run: you can take a ride in them around Verkhnyaya Pishma!

There's also a museum of military hardware next door, which we were duly bowled over by too. In all, I would never have thought that bringing so many exhibits together in one place was remotely possible!

Video: The Ural Automotive Museum







Ekaterinburg at night...

...and the long-awaited Asia-Europe boundary



Approaching the city of Naberezhnye Chelny –
a cloud concert in the sky!





Our last stop-off before we reached Moscow – the city of Nizhy Novgorod. Our evening stroll around the center was most pleasant – especially along its pedestrianized Bolshaya Pokrovskaya Street. Highlights: the Theater of Drama, and the “Jolly Goat”, which, incidentally, has survived many an attempt to steal it. Alas, our walk around the city’s famous Kremlin was a hurried one; still – there wasn’t all that much to see anyway since it was being repaired and had scaffolding over much of it – in preparation for the city’s 800-year jubilee.



The “Breakthrough” sculpture

We pass the 100km distance marker – that is, 100km to/from Moscow. I recalled how, weeks earlier, as we set off on that freezing morning in Magadan, the distance we needed to cover was in five figures! However, the distances given across Russia aren't those from the capital; they're of each individual road. Accordingly, we really appreciated three and four-figure distances on the markers (single and double-digit ones flew past unnoticeably). Curiously, the distance marker just the day before went from four-figure to three-figure, while today we'd be seeing the wholly unserious double figures!...

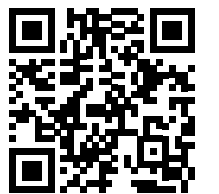
Video: Full day dashcam recording:
Nizhny Novgorod to Moscow





Finally, we make it to K-HQ in Moscow – our Magadan-to-Moscow road expedition completed honorably. What a trip! What was intended to be a quick drive out to the Pole of Cold and just as quick a drive back to the nearest civilization, it turned out to be a dive into a magical white world of endless straight roads cutting across vast expanses of severe yet extraordinarily beautiful landscapes. Unexpected, unbelievable, incredible!

Video: Road Trip 2021: Magadan–Yakutsk–Moscow. The full video!



Eugene Kaspersky

Winter on the Kolyma Highway

Magadan to Yakutsk and beyond...
Get ready to be astonished!

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More impressions:



Where can you go in Russia in the winter? Actually, there are plenty of options. But from that plenty, one seemed to stand out: the Yakutian village of Oymyakon, known to all Russians since school geography lessons. "Should we go there, then?" I was asked. "We should," came my immediate, automatic reply. So we did it: a drive to Oymyakon from a nearby city during the Russian New Year public holidays (every year: ~December 31 to January ~9), when it's ~50°C or below...

Oymyakon is situated equidistantly between the two Siberian cities of Yakutsk and Magadan. Thus, the Yakutsk–Oymyakon–Magadan route

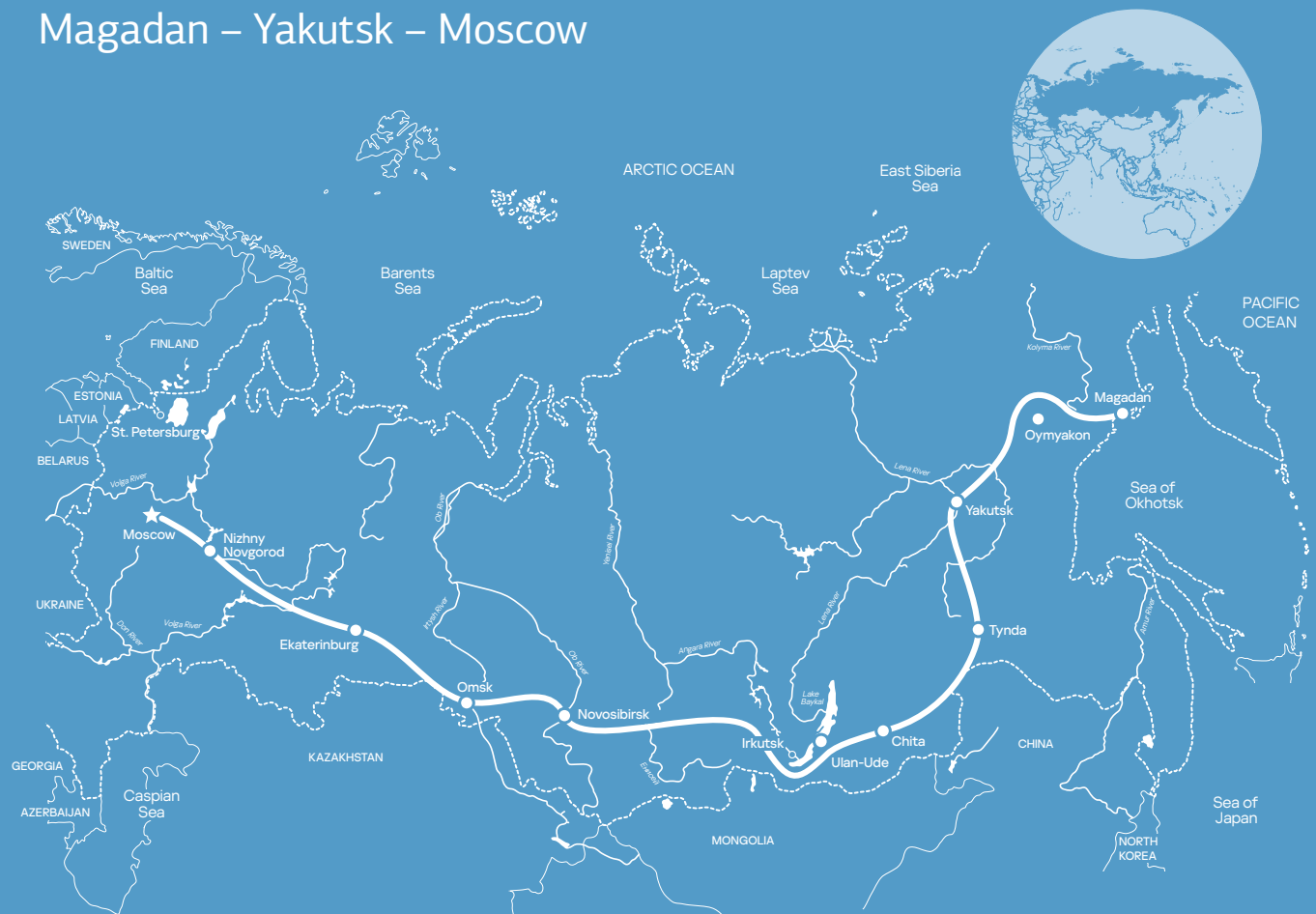
was first suggested – deemed the best way to check out not only this legendary village, but also 2000 kilometers of the surrounding winter wonderland landscapes and conditions of extreme cold. But in the process of preparing for the expedition I quickly understood that I wouldn't be satisfied with just that: for I very much love *long* road trips. And that's how the idea to continue the road trip – all the way to Moscow! – was born. Route: Magadan–Oymyakon–Yakutsk–Moscow. And there'd be a bonus: we'd be making a few stops for meet-ups with some of our partners and customers out in those frozen parts of the country. You drive 100 kilometers, 200, 300... All around

you a winter-wonderland fairytale. It casts a spell over you – as if hypnotized. On, and on, and on. For the driver, with hardly any need to slow down to take a turn, you get into a groove: the car basically drives itself while you just stare at the road ahead – trance-like. Basically: self-hypnosis and automotive-meditation rolled into one!

In this book I present to you the very best – mostly wholly unexpected – impressions we garnered in 12,000 kilometers (through eight time zones) across nearly the full length of Russia from Magadan to Moscow. Enjoy!...

Eugene Kaspersky

Magadan – Yakutsk – Moscow



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