Expedition Kolyma, North-Eastern Siberia

Report- Flag # 95

By

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At the mouth of the Kolyma River, Ambarchik Bay 22/4/2005

Dear explorers,

Three months has passed since we left the Kolyma River, Siberia, Russia and returned back home to Sweden. Life, since, hasn’t been all that easy. The rhythm is very fast back home here. There’s very little time to slow down, sit and relax, enjoy and talk. At times it feels like this great and overwhelming 10 month long Expedition along the Kolyma River has never happened. And, nobody will ever understand, properly, what we’ve gone through, seen and heard, experienced and discovered. It’s almost like we’ve returned home with the Jewel in the Crown and nobody can see it!

Nonetheless, we did do the job we set out to do!

The objectives of the Expedition before we left Sweden the 15th of July 2004 were as follows:
We are choosing to travel in this adventurous manner since we realise, after sixteen years of extreme expeditions all over the world, that the purpose of the journey cannot be achieved in any other way. The purpose is namely to document, in a down-to-earth, positive and fair manner, parts of our world that are unknown at the present time but very important for our future. It is, moreover, a means of travel that takes you up close to things in a manner that is non-aggressive, close to nature and, as a rule, healthy. As for the people we meet along the way, we have noticed that it is very easy for them to relate to the hardships we endure, since their daily life is usually governed by physical labour, the capriciousness of the forces of nature and the eternal hunt for food. This immediately enables us to gain admission to their lives.

The main aim is to use words and pictures to make a record of this unknown part of our world. This is a vital task, since in the course of our extensive research work we have realised that very few people have a comprehensive picture of the area along the Kolyma River. The obstacles are the cold, the distance, the size and the isolation. The area is untouched, remote and unknown. We also believe that it is in this untouched area that the answers to many of the questions asked by modern men are to be found: What are we doing here? What is our task? How do we find calm, harmony and satisfaction in our lives?

Making such a record is a task that is not only vital, but urgent. It concerns both the harmony and insight available to future generations as well as knowledge not only about this unique area of tundra and taiga that is as yet untouched, but also the equally unique people who live there. We shall do everything in our power to make a realistic record of how we and the people we meet experience the daily life and dreams of this area, but we will primarily focus on what is positive. We want our work not only to be educational, but also to inspire hope, motivation, energy and enormous joie de vivre! It goes without saying that there will be a large helping of excitement and adventure as well…
We shall also record the adventures and personal hardships we endure. There is an ever-growing need for dreams, excitement and adventure. It is almost a prerequisite for feeling good nowadays. We shall therefore record how we three endure the cold, how we deal with the animals we meet, what we do about our various mishaps, how we cross pack ice and open water and how we survive day by day. That in itself will be a great adventure.

We also feel it is important that during the course of our journey we should record how the original inhabitants of Siberia live, think and view the world around them and the future. How do they survive the extreme cold? There is much knowledge to be gleaned from them.

Another aim of this expedition is to build a bridge between our cultures, widen the western world’s knowledge about the Russian and Siberian way. We want to find the Russian and Siberian temperament. We believe this can provide a perspective on the way of life in the future.

Expedition leader Mikael Strandberg with his assistant Johan Ivarsson

Short summery of the Expedition:

*We travelled approximately 3500 km:s by canoe and skis during 10 months of exploration.*

We began canoeing in the beginning of August, in a tributary to the Kolyma River, a nasty river called Kulu and got hit immediately by a typhoon. The water level of the river rose 7 metres in a couple of days, we didn’t sleep for a week and slogged our way through dangerous rapids and difficult currents for a month. Nevertheless, we eventually made it all the way to a small Russian settlement called Zyryanka, which we reached in the middle of October. We hunted and fished for survival all this time.
We left Zyryanka in the middle of November and skid, dragging 330 pounds of weight behind us each, in darkness and extreme cold, all the way up to our goal at Ambarchik Bay, which we reached at the end of April 2005.

Map and route as below:
Accomplishments:

-We’ve definitely done one of the coldest Expeditions in the history of exploration. We started freezing the 25th of September 2004 and stopped once we climbed on the plane back to Moscow the 26th of April 2005. Average cold during the darkest –and we mean pitch black, day and night, most of the time- was -54°F. During that time we skid between 12-16 hours a day, in total darkness, and we couldn’t really sleep during the nights in the tent, since we froze incredibly much. We hauled 330 pounds of heavy sledges per person behind us and every time we stopped, for a very short break or when it was time to pitch camp, all our sweat froze immediately. Under our armpits, our faces, the backbones and even the holy parts. It took the whole night to thaw of the ice of the body. So we kind of slept with bent backs. It was one long nightmare, dominated by a big discomfort, since we also had all our technical equipment and damp clothes inside the sleeping bags. It was so cold during this time, which all metals in our equipment broke like glass. Like our ski bindings. Petrol froze, so we couldn’t cook on the stove and we picked up plenty of frostbites.

-We have done a serious documentation of how modern humans like us can cope with the cold compared to the hardy locals living along the Kolyma. One of the coldest inhabited regions in the world. And we’ve discovered a lot of truths, that differ from the general picture painted by so called polar scientist’s who have never lived outdoors in a tent during the darkest of winter. And none seem to have monitored locals during a whole season. Withstanding cold definitely has nothing to do with genetics, it is just a question of acclimatisation.

For example, before leaving on this Expedition, I read all modern accounts of polar travel and we were stunned how many of them suffered from severe frostbites. I figured that was due to two reasons, one, they were not brought up in snow and cold. Two, they didn’t live permanently in a cold climate. Like all northern natives for example. And like ourselves, since we’re brought up and live like Bushmen in one of the coldest places in Scandinavia. As a
result, even though we lived outdoors in a climate much more severe, and longer, than almost all other polar explorers, we didn’t suffer any serious frostbite.

On top of that, there was the subject regarding fat. One very famous polar scientist told me, when I let him know that we’d added on almost 40 pounds of additional fat each on our bodies, to cope with the cold: “Have you ever seen a fat native?” I’d like to ask him: “Have you ever spent a whole season with a native trapper?” The reality is, that in November they all had a couple of extra layers of fat on their trained bodies, but once springtime arrived, they’d lost most of it due to insufficient amounts of food!

-We have documented every little cottage and hut along the Kolyma and the great locals living there. We’ve documented their daily lives and thoughts.

-We survived ourselves on 3 months of trapping, hunting and fishing. We didn’t carry any food during our canoeing part except salt, spices, cooking oil, coffee and flower. We showed that our skills as local Swedish trappers were good enough for survival during the autumn (we wouldn’t have coped with the extreme winter), even though we lost a lot of weight! We’ve eaten everything from fried moose brain to raw frozen fish.

Swedish trappers along the Kolyma

-We’ve penetrated deeply into the native people’s daily life and history, like the Yugahirs, the Yakut, the Even, the Chukchi, the Evenk and the Caucasian Russians. We also know a lot about their spiritual life, their historical background and their thoughts of the future.

-We have also come very close to a deep understanding regarding the dramatic changes due to the arrival of perestroika in the region and we’ve documented the opinions of the people. And seen the profound changes of their lives. Generally, for the worse.
-We’ve documented the survival and life of the Yakut horse, which the equestrian world thought was almost extinct.

-We’ve also documented Stalin’s terrible history along the Kolyma in the form of ruined Gulags. We’ve met and documented survivors, their relatives and how their lives have turned out today.

-We also sent a two language dispatch over satellite almost everyday. All together there are over 250 reports to be read and studied at www.siberia.nu from the Expedition. We’ve also sent TV-programmes over the satellite.

-Most important, however, we’ve come across the best people I’ve met during almost 20 years of exploration all over the world. I miss them deeply. Life will not be easy without them. I intensely miss just walking into a yurangi –a Chukchi reindeer cot- sit down on the comfortable skins on the ground, feel the heat from the stove and start talking about any given subject of the day. I have finally realised why we humans differ from the rest of the ape family, it is our form of communication! I have never felt as happy as when sitting for hours talking to people. Now, once back home in the west, it seems like we westerners are returning back to the rest of the family of the other apes. Communication here in the west is lousy and it is getting worse by the day!

For in-depth information about the Expedition, visit www.siberia.nu
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Project leader (Titti had to pull out of the Expedition, once we reached Magadan, due to heart failure)

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The team before leaving Sweden, mid-July 2004