

**1 Most bridges are wooden, covered with ice, structurally unsound and should be approached with extreme caution**

**2 BMW F800GS at an overnight campsite on the Kazakh Steppe**

**3 Crossing the Lena River by ferry from Yakutsk to Aldan and the beginning of the Road of Bones**

**4 It could almost be an autumn day in Blighty; feels like riding up the side of mountain in the middle of Siberia. Very bracing**



★ Rated Travel

# ‘We’d been on the Road of Bones for a week and it was 2000 miles since we last saw a paved road’

**Ewan and Charley made it famous, but two million Gulag prisoners made it possible. Now there’s a guided motorcycle tour from London deep into darkest Russia**

**Words** Joe Vella **Photography** Compass Expeditions

**I**t was built during the Stalin era by Gulag prisoners and up to two million of them perished, leaving their bodies under the road, hence the grisly nickname. It’s also the coldest place on earth, with the exception of Antarctica.

The Kolyma highway, the M56, the Road of Bones. Call it what you want, this route has become synonymous with adventure motorcycling, offering one of the last great frontiers for those after a genuine challenge on two wheels.

A group of us gathered at London’s Ace Café, pointed our assortment of BMW GSs east and began the first step of the ride of our lives. It was the start of a 100-day expedition from London to Magadan being led by Compass Expeditions.

The whirl through France, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria gave us a great taste of a compact yet fascinating continent. But Siberia’s chill winds beckoned and we didn’t linger long in Europe. Istanbul marked the transition from Europe to Asia and gave us a chance to get off the bikes for a few days. We continued on into Turkey, stopping at the Troglodyte village of Goreme, where we spent three nights sleeping in caves and enjoying the remarkable landscape.

Riding the Anatolian Plains took us to the Ottoman city of Safranbolu and the Unesco-listed city of Amaysa, two amazing yet little-known places. We eventually reached the Turkish Black Sea coast and followed it to Trabzon, our departure point for Russia.





**1 Communist Party monuments are peppered along the route in Russia**

**2 Istanbul marks the transition from Europe to Asia**

**3 In Mongolia this passes for a bridge. Not for the faint-hearted or inaccurate**

**4 'Wild yet generous' locals with limitless supplies of vodka**

**5 Old collides with the new in Yakutsk**

**6 Traditional Uzbekistan delicacy of Heinz tomato soup**

**1**

A 12-hour ferry crossing from Trabzon to Sochi turned into a 24-hour marathon thanks to delays and incompetence that could only be matched by that of the Russian border post at Sochi. After an agonising six hours of waiting and filling in forms we were finally allowed into Russia at 1am.

Eventually, riding in Russia – something that was not so easy as recently as only a decade or so ago – was a big thrill. We rode into Volgograd, called Stalingrad when it saw the bloodiest battle of World War II, and then on to Moscow.

Crossing into Kazakhstan we entered the mighty Kazakh Steppe, a region so vast it's possible to see the curvature of the earth. The nights spent camping out under the stars in this lonely, silent place will live long in the memory.

We took to the Silk Road as we crossed into Uzbekistan, where riding the edge of the Kyzyl Kum desert meant temperatures well into the 40s. On non-riding days we visited the mighty Registan and wandered the bazaars and spice markets of Bukhara.

Sadly Kyrgyzstan was removed from the original itinerary due to violent civil unrest, which meant we ended up riding the Western Tien Shan mountains in southern Kazakhstan. After having the bikes serviced at BMW Almaty we rode north across the Kazakh Steppe and back into Russia, hitting the Trans Siberian Highway towards Irkutsk. We stopped to visit the jewel-like Lake Baikal, ringed by distant snow-capped peaks.

Mongolia was the next country on our route, and one often described as the world's largest paddock because the few roads are mostly dirt tracks and the majority of riding is on open grasslands. The journey here was epic, through yawning valleys under a huge blue sky while rare Bactrian Camels grazed nearby. The landscape, dotted with the traditional gers of Mongolian herdsmen near crystal clear rivers and stands of pine, was incredible, unforgettable stuff.

The riding was tough in sections and much of the day would be spent standing on the footpegs, while another part of every day would be spent retrieving bikes that had been dropped in rivers.

For the third and final time we rode back into Russia, once again along the Trans Siberian Highway. We rode onto Chita, where the rest of the group helped my wife Carmen and I celebrate our 30th wedding anniversary with the local prostitutes and their pimps at an adjoining restaurant to our hotel. It was, to say the least, a humorous night.

We turned north from the Trans Siberian and rode the Lena Highway to another world. This rough dirt road provided

**▶ We savoured the hot Borscht soup and the warmth of the basic café. The further we rode the more spectacular the scenery became – a backdrop of yellows and reds**

stunning riding as we cut through a landscape turning into the autumn colours of the Taiga forests that stretched to the horizon.

Looking for a camping spot one evening a local reindeer hunter insisted we camp beside his log cabin, on the banks of a river that brilliantly reflected the Taiga. A Sable Cat, recently shot, was being stewed and fish from the river dried on the wall while huskies became frantic with our presence.

After a break in Yakutsk we crossed the Lena River by ferry and began what we had all come for – the Road of Bones. The weather had turned against us and we rode in light rain for many hours as the temperature struggled to top five degrees. Stopping at one of only a handful of truck stops, we savoured the hot Borscht soup and the warmth of the basic café.

The further we rode the more spectacular the scenery became, a backdrop of yellows and reds to a wild, uninhabited land. Rickety



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**1 Bike tucked away in the garage for winter? Shame on you**

**2 No broken bones. No DNFs. Even the sun came out to celebrate the end of the 100-day trip**



wooden bridges barely maintained the strength to carry us across silt-laden rivers. The campsites were some of the finest on the entire journey, wild, empty and silent.

We battled on, dealing with savagely low temperatures. Every now and again a village would interrupt the wondrous vista, each looking as though it had been bombed long ago. It was hard to believe they were inhabited, and perhaps Stalin had a keen sense of irony to build his Gulags in an area surrounded by such beauty.

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When our support vehicle's trailer broke an axle it led to a chance encounter with some wild but generous Russians, and a long night with too much vodka interspersed with some welding. These tough guys from an even tougher land displayed generosity and friendliness that will stay with us forever.

After 100 days on the road the sun must have known it was our last, as it came out to mark the end of our trip. Still, we were at around 2100 feet above sea level so the temperature was low. After a week on the Road of Bones, and having covered 2000 miles since we last saw a paved road, we reached tarmac and enjoyed a final ride into Magadan.

After 100 days and 17,000 miles we were proud to have accomplished something so very few had before. We'd experienced every kind of weather, road and emotion. Every rider who set off from the Ace stood under the Magadan sign. No trip-ending injuries, no terminal bike problems. We'd made it. **Bike**



#### ROUTE

Through Europe to Turkey. Cross the Black Sea to Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, then back to Kazakhstan. Then Russia again and east to Mongolia. Back to Russia and Trans Siberian and Lena highways to the Road of Bones.



#### Compass Expeditions

Cost US\$27,990 (£17,900) for rider,

US\$18,990 (£12,000) for pillion

Bike hire available at US\$120 per day (F800GS)

or US\$140 per day (R1200GS)

Contact [www.compassexpeditions.com](http://www.compassexpeditions.com)

**Bike tip** Travel light. Overloading bikes causes problems

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