

Features

Sanity is just a train ride and a day's skiing away

Letter from Siberia

Gabi Mocatta

It is a frigid, ice-blue morning as we wait for a train out of town. The sun has not yet risen, and distant mountains stand black against the horizon. On the station platform children in leopard spots yawn, and hardy babushkas struggle with loads for their winter dachas. Skiers talk softly in the snow-muffled quiet.

This is Krasnoyarsk, crumbling metropolis of 1m on the banks of the mighty Yenisei river. Away from the belching smokestacks of its industrial left bank, it is almost a handsome city. On broad, tree-lined avenues, ornate wooden mansions remind one of a Cossack past, and gaudy 50s blocks of flats mingle with the fortress-like towers of the newly rich.

For most people, though, life is hard. Wage arrears mount month on month. Pensions are late and inadequate. Soaring inflation means lean pickings for the majority. Crime, unemployment and homelessness add to the rising tide of despair.

It's a bleak world if you let it get to you, which is why even on the coldest winter weekends people throng station platforms for an out-of-town break. "It's what keeps us sane," explains Albina Aleksandrovna, a feisty grandmother of six. A librarian at the city's institute of technology, she has not been paid for months. "The snow and the sun and the freedom of the forest are what sustain me from week to week."

Forty minutes out of town, the train carriages have almost emptied. There's time for a communal cup of tea fortified with illicit home-brewed samagon before we skiers bundle out at a broken-down siding.

Half an hour along our cross-country route we are well strung out along the forest path. The front skiers break a trail in the new snow, and the rest glide smoothly behind. Fall off your skis and you are swimming in powder. Stand up without them and you flounder in waist-high drifts. Lungs pounding out torrents of frozen breath, we speed down narrow forest corridors, then burst into dazzling clearings. Thick layers of snow blanket every horizontal surface. Trees slumber under their

voluptuous covers. The only movement is the flutter of finches, and our kick-glide, kick-glide as we speed exhilaratingly past.

Twelve o'clock, and a wooden sign tells us we've come halfway. It's time for the Russian winter sportsman's brew-up. Soon a healthy blaze is going, and great, battered boiling cans emerge from rucksacks. There are hunks of black sourdough bread, pickled cucumbers, salted fish, steaming potato soup and weighty slabs of smoked pork fat that melt deliciously in the mouth.

Inevitably, flasks of vodka appear. We toast our fortune for this simple outdoor pleasure in the heart of a country in crisis. "Slava sovietskomy sporty!" someone shouts — "Glory to Soviet sport!" — and the group breaks into song. Then there is tea with jam and Krasnoyarsk's famous chocolate, before the fire hisses furiously into a soggy grave.

In high spirits we strike out again into the forest. Bears, we joke, will get any stragglers, so we bunch up more tightly into swaying, giggling file.

By early afternoon the forest thins, and we catch glimpses of the sluggish Yenisei, heaving its way north to the Arctic Ocean. Our destination is Divnogorsk (Marvellous Mountain), a beleaguered 60s township built for workers on Krasnoyarsk's vast hydroelectric dam. With much of its waters captured, the Yenisei no longer freezes, but when temperatures reach minus 20C it steams in silent frustration. Today, though, the river is clear and sparkling in the sun.

As we skim along high, wooded banks we catch the tinny sounds of a crooning Russian diva. The unmistakable aroma of kebabs wafts on the evening air, signalling civilisation and our journey's end.

Under flickering lights at the grimy bus station other groups converge in a clatter of skis. On the 10-rouble bus ride home, approaching the industrial glare of the night city, we retreat into contemplation. I think of sons at war, of jobless husbands, brothers, wives, of bright children with dreary futures, crowded homes with empty shelves, bank balances "lost" and wages due.

But next to me, Sasha Alexeiye-vich, Exalted Mountaineer of the USSR, is beaming. "Isn't new snow in the forest the most beautiful thing in the world?"