

INTO THE SH

A small coterie of top-end travel outfitters are making it their business to expedite cross-border travel to far-flung lands. **Sophy Roberts** journeys along remote routes and gains authentic insights into both the everyday and the extraordinary



We are 30 miles from the border post between Siberia and Mongolia – on a map of Russia, that’s halfway between the Urals and the Pacific – when we stop for a 50p bowl of borscht at a roadside café. Galya, the cook, fries blinis in front of us; she pours on lashings of condensed milk. She doesn’t smile, but there is something in the care she takes that implies we are a rare occurrence on this lonely road weaving through the Russian steppe. Not until we are about to leave does she ask why we are driving through this remote territory in a snowstorm, journeying down from Ulan-Ude, capital of the Siberian Republic of Buryatia, to Ulan Bator, capital of Mongolia. I say something about looking for a piano in Kyakhta, which is the next town. It seems tactless to tell her the real reason – that I find border crossings alluring – when Galya was brought up on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain. I know very well I’m pursuing a first-world privilege. In regimes where passports don’t exist, where there is genocide, war and famine, the hunger to cross borders is so great that people risk their lives and those of their children to get to the other side. With the Syrian crisis, the dark side of border crossings floods the headlines. For people fleeing Iraq, Ukraine, Afghanistan and dozens of other countries in the world, borders are

ADOW LANDS

a terrifying barrier. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), an average 1.7m people seek asylum in another country every year; at least 12m are stateless, with no nationality – yet here I am, in old Gulag country, travelling freely over barriers with a British passport, moving across territory that was once locked down with missiles, military and secret police. It is an experience I am grateful to be reminded of; people like me who have the freedom to travel tend to forget borders even exist in the time-poor pursuit of convenient holidays. It is also, increasingly, a privilege satisfied by a small coterie of top-end travel outfitters who have made it their business to expedite difficult border crossings in far-flung lands.

“I like the strangeness of a remote border crossing,” says my fixer for this Siberian journey, Seattle-based Douglas Grimes, who 30 years ago started his business, MIR Corporation, offering trips to Russia. “I’m reminded of old explorers coming up to an outpost and having to negotiate their way into the next fiefdom. These days there’s still rigmarole involved, and a bit of fear. No one wants to end up in visa prison. In the early 1990s I arrived in Moscow a day before my visa was valid. They put me in a barred hotel room for the night.”

Back then, travel in the USSR was confined to bleak Intourist hotels and predetermined routes, with nearly every land border in lockdown. “That situation has improved somewhat, even if there is always a whiff of the old authoritarian regime,” says Grimes. Now MIR’s territory has extended beyond Russia to the Silk

Main picture: a MIR Corporation tour leader at Lake Baikal in southern Siberia. Inset: a Wild Frontiers trek to K2 in Baltistan

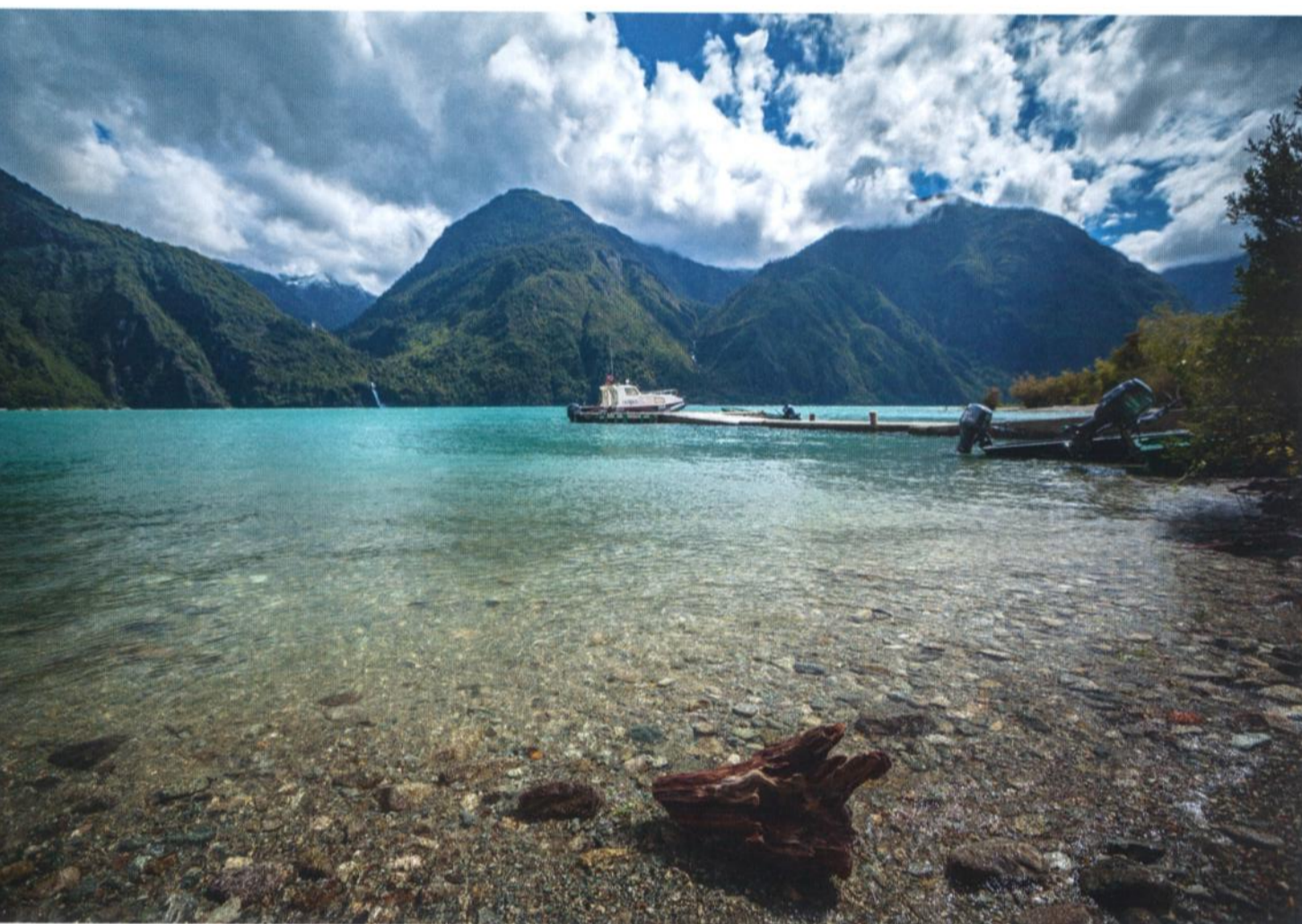


Road “stans” (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan), Iran and western China. “Turkmenistan is an interesting one,” says Grimes. “Just getting the approval letter, which comes from a special ministry, takes up to three weeks. Then you spend two weeks getting the visa. It is one of the few countries where we’ve had people rejected. We don’t know why; it seems random.”

Still, like Grimes, I enjoy the tensions of a good border crossing, even if I rely on experts to remove most of the pressure, with paperwork checks before I leave and a hierarchy of fixers who know how to grease the system. Last year, with Michael Lorentz of Passage to Africa, I crossed from Uganda into the Democratic Republic of Congo at Arua to visit Garamba National Park, a dangerous area for poaching with an extraordinary (and rapidly diminishing) elephant population. I was nervous, then amazed. Lorentz’s local man swept us through the border controls more quickly than I get through a British supermarket checkout, which left me free to suck up the curious energy that exists in places where ideologies rub



From top: the author chats to an anti-poaching patrol in Garamba National Park, Democratic Republic of Congo. Swoop Travel offers an obscure border crossing on foot and by boat via Tagua Tagua park in Chilean Patagonia



up against each other – in politics, religion and culture. Crossing from Kenya to Tanzania last year with my children, I deliberately took them via the land border, travelling from Migori to Tarime, rather than by plane, which is the norm. I wanted them to understand that the Mara-Serengeti is about people, not just wildlife. For that trip I took advice from Will Bolsover of Natural World Safaris, which also organises bespoke expeditions to view the western lowland gorillas and forest elephants of the Central African Republic, travelling upriver from the Republic of Congo, via the border crossing at Bomassa, to Bayanga. Without assistance from professionals, such journeys are infinitely more stressful, which I discovered in 2004 when I did my own visa logistics. I travelled from Xinjiang in western China over the Torugart Pass into Kyrgyzstan. I then got to our crossing into Uzbekistan earlier than expected, and as the entry on my visa was for a specific date, I had to wait at the border post until midnight to get through to the other side. Had I been another 24 hours out on timing, the bus would simply have left without me.

But the travel outfitters to rely on for these territories aren’t dealing with backpackers; they are catering to inquisitive, high-end travellers willing to pay so no one

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is left in the lurch. Last year I crossed overland between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo at Goma. My fixer, Praveen Moman of Volcanoes Safaris, had it all in hand with the border authorities, giving me time to clock the parked-up yellow Pontiac Firebird Trans Am. How did it get here? The whiff of corruption was everywhere. But then with border crossings, an element of danger is part of the appeal, even if it comes from a largely Hollywood-fed fear of state authority, of men in uniforms, of something more powerful than my British passport, or Grimes’ American one. They are dynamics we miss out on with modern plane travel; no man’s land is skipped over, the flight plans gliding over each country’s passing on the screen embedded into the seat in front of us. With air travel, there’s no romance – which I am expecting from Kyakhta, the Siberian town where I will cross over into

the country often credited with inventing the concept of a passport under the rule of Genghis Khan.

In the 19th century, Kyakhta (which means “couch grass” in the local Buryat language) was an epicentre of luxury – a critical trading post between Russia and China. Back then the town, also known as “the Sandy Venice”, was “regarded with respect in Paris, London and New York”, according to Siberian writer Valentin Rasputin. A Kyakhta merchant’s orders were ones “everyone fulfilled first, knowing that Kyakhta was not stingy”: the church had columns made of crystal; the women wore dresses from Worth in Paris. The Russians sold Amur sable furs; the Chinese sold silks and tons of tea. Rasputin wrote: “People from Germany took up residence in Kyakhta and people from Kyakhta went to Switzerland, and no one was the least surprised.” This cosmopolitanism is evident in the municipal museum, which features a collection of furniture and ornaments gifted by a former citizen, the late Alexey Mikhailovich Lushnikov.

Among unlikely exhibits of 1970s space food in toothpaste tubes, a stuffed 100-year-old bear and a mannequin dressed in a suit printed with Perestroika slogans, there is Lushnikov’s chess set – an exquisite 19th-century example, with intricately carved ivory pieces – and his 1874 Carl Bechstein grand piano. The strings are broken. According to one of the museum’s curators, Irina Saksudaeva, the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg sent someone three years ago to cost the piano’s renovation; it proved too expensive, so the piano sits in a cold room in a town where churches have lost their roofs and once-grand façades of houses are closed up and scratched with graffiti.

I like Kyakhta’s decrepit soul on a forgotten rim of Russia – enough to seek out Lushnikov’s mansion, where the Bechstein once filled the library with the music of Schumann. Like the rest of town, the house is a ghostly skeleton, the stone filigree work around the windows falling

into the snow. But unlike other 19th-century cities in Russia, Kyakhta’s fate was sealed even before the Bolshevik Revolution. It started falling off the map when the Suez Canal began to bring tea into Russia by sea. Then the Tran-Siberian Railway was built at the turn of the 20th century, taking a route many miles to the town’s northwest. The merchants left. The customs house fell empty. Beside it now stands the modern border post, where trucks linger before passing into Mongolia. No man’s land is lined with high barbed-wire fencing. The ground is marked with tracks from the tanks that patrol the border.

A Russian guard stamps my passport. He says that aside from Russian and Mongolian citizens, only a couple of foreigners a day make this crossing in winter. In summer he sees Koreans, who don’t need visas. Two hours later, I’m in a Mongolian queue, which MIR says



and Roman sites with no-name restaurants and low-key guesthouses in the clefts of under-visited mountains. For 2016, he will be tackling the borders between Turkey, Georgia, Armenia and Nagorno-Kharabakh, the politically fragile, self-proclaimed country wedged between Armenia and Azerbaijan. "Nagorno-Kharabakh is like entering a forbidden kingdom. Visitors have to register for a visa with the ministry of foreign affairs in the capital, Stepanakert, after they arrive, which is like going to visit consular services in Tunbridge Wells," says Smith. As for Armenia, it is a country that has been gnawing at Smith since 1979, when he first travelled through eastern Turkey. Back then, Armenia was in Soviet lockdown. "From that moment, I've wanted to slip over the border," he says. "Armenia, which is one of the oldest Christian nations in the world, has lots of lonely roads. I like lonely roads."

Lonely roads. It's the phrase that keeps coming back to me in Kyakhta, where we see no foreign travellers, allowing me to encounter what has become so elusive in modern travel: the everyday. There is the man importing



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is a quicker crossing than they are used to. I could have hung about for longer. I love the dour faces, the shouting Mongol caught smuggling contraband, the sportsman and his son going to a wrestling contest. In moving slowly, I notice things that pass me by in airports. And I take pleasure in the conversation I have with the Russian border guard about the merits of José Mourinho.

From top: Lake Khövsgöl on the Siberia/Mongolia border, a route currently closed to anyone except Russians and Mongols. The Siberia/Mongolia border at Kyakhta. Prayer flags on the Khardung La pass in northern India

Inspired by the experience, Grimes and I discuss the perfect loop, working with Mongolia experts Nomadic Expeditions to get permission to cross the border back into Siberia at Lake Khövsgöl. The route is currently closed to anyone except Russians and Mongols. If it were accessible, it would link northwest Mongolia with the trunk road that leads to the Siberian city of Irkutsk, where I started my journey, to create a 10-day circuit through old Buryatia – a fascinating region defined by its dominant ethnic group, the Buddhist Buryats. "It will be a challenge," says Grimes, "but not impossible. Border crossings are an interesting business." Just last year he cracked a new favourite – crossing by train from Vladivostok into North Korea via the town of Tumangang.

I admire Grimes for his doggedness with such journeys. It would be far easier to sell a plane ticket than fuss about with complex overland logistics. But in the tour-operating industry, which is being eroded by travellers booking their trips direct with hotels, guides and drivers on the ground, he is holding onto a critical piece of expertise that validates his company's role as a trip designer. Every year he organises difficult overland car journeys for private clients spending tens of thousands of dollars.

There are others like him, including Sally Dodge at Patagonia specialist Swoop Travel, who tipped me off about an obscure crossing, Paso Rio Puelo, between Chile and Argentina, travelling from Tagua Tagua (a roadless park) on foot and by boat into the Argentinian Lake District. Jonny Bealby at Wild Frontiers is another

valuable resource. In 2009, I travelled with Bealby through the Nubra Valley in northern Ladakh in India among sparse Himalayan peaks peppered with Buddhist monasteries, looping silver rivers and meadows of almond trees. The road we wanted to follow had storied allure, evoking the "Great Game" period of the late 19th century, when Russian and British spies, monks and traders travelled to Baltistan. Our path, however, was blocked by soldiers. "Borders are a pain in the ass," said Bealby. The phrase stayed with me. It was the very existence of the barrier that made me want to be there – and caused me to return five years later, despite the border still being off limits due to Nubra's proximity to the politically charged Line of Control between India and Pakistan, to penetrate a little deeper into the so-called Valley of Sorrow. It reminds me how travel can be defined by our experience of coming up against our limits, not just our achievements, which is appealing when, on the flip side, money will get us anywhere.

Rupert Smith articulates the same motivation: closed borders, like forbidden fruits, feed a hunger. Smith is an Oxford-educated classicist who leads bespoke walking trips for small groups through the ruins of the ancient world in Italy, Turkey, Greece and Albania. His itineraries weave together Ottoman, Byzantine, Greek

cheap Chinese toys across the border in the back of an old Russian jeep, and the woman in sheer tights in temperatures hitting minus 20. I wonder who she is waiting for – a lover from the other side of this arbitrary line in the steppe? And the tall Mongolian dressed in Canada Goose? He puts out his hand to greet me, speaking with a strong American accent. "Perfect timing," he says. "My name is Anand. I'm with Nomadic Expeditions. I will be your guide in Mongolia." ♦

REMOTE POSSIBILITIES

Sophy Roberts travelled as a guest of **MIR Corporation** (www.mircorp.com) and **Nomadic Expeditions** (www.nomadicexpeditions.com); similar 10-day Siberia/Mongolia trips, from about \$8,995. **Natural World Safaris**, 01273-691 642; www.naturalworldsafaris.com; nine-day Kenya/Tanzania trips, from £5,750. **Passage to Africa**, www.passagetoafrica.com; Uganda/Rwanda/Democratic Republic of Congo trips, from \$1,500 per day. **Rupert Smith**, 07960-118 358; www.theviaschool.com; seven-day Turkey/Georgia/Armenia tours, from £1,750. **Swoop Travel**, 0117-369 0196; www.swoop-patagonia.co.uk; 10-day Chilean/Argentinian Patagonia trips, from \$4,500. **Volcanoes Safaris**, 03333-239 740; www.volcanoessafaris.com; four-day Rwanda/Uganda gorilla-trekking expeditions, from \$4,663. **Wild Frontiers**, 020-7736 3968; www.wildfrontierstravel.com; 15-day Nubra Valley trek, £2,395.