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Border Crossing

With the King's Road as his route, JOSH DEAN embarks upon a journey of royal proportions, from the coast of Finland to the heart of Russia

TURKU, FINLAND, IS A QUIET PLACE. Until the Russians moved the capital to Helsinki in 1812, Turku enjoyed a good six centuries as Finland's most important city. But these days, it's a town of ship-builders and university students, known for its medieval castle and especially for its proximity to the vast Baltic archipelago, where many Finns summer. »



En route to
St. Petersburg.

MAP BY ENCARNITA RIVERA

Itinerary

Within Finland, the King's Road is exceptionally well marked, by brown signs showing yellow crowns (information and maps: www.kuninkaantie.net/eng/eng.html). In Russia, the route is not marked, and you are strongly advised to stick to the main highway.

Day 1

Turku to Helsinki (125 miles). Take the E18 to Salo, then follow 52 south to Tenala. Head east and connect with 104 after Pohja. Continue north past Fiskars and catch 186 southeast to Mustio, then take 25 to Kittilä. Go east to Siuntio, then south on 115, connecting to route 51 east, then to 50, which becomes the E18 highway into Helsinki.

Day 2

Helsinki to Kotka (120 miles). Take the E18 out of town until Puustola. Pick up 140 north to 152, go east to 142, and continue east to Savijärvi. Get back on E18 and head to Kotka.

Day 3

Kotka to St. Petersburg (180 miles). Take the E18 to Hamina, then jog south, following signs to Virolahti (some of this stretch is unpaved). At the Russian border, pick up the M10 and take it all the way to St. Petersburg.

Day 4

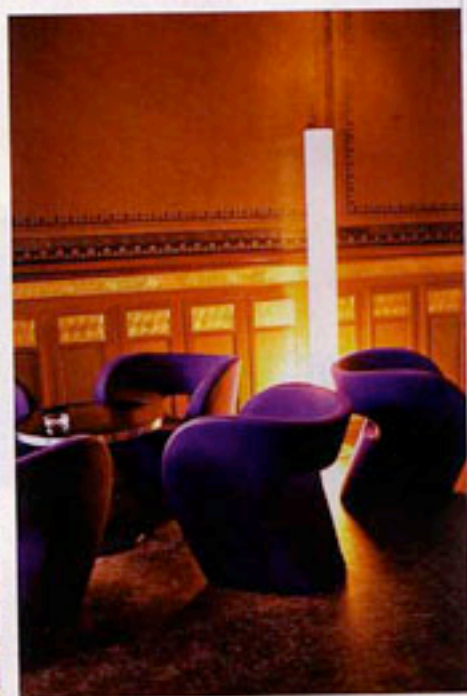
St. Petersburg to Tver (280 miles). Head out from the central city southeast on the M10, for a long and mostly straight shot to Tver.

Day 5

Tver to Moscow (120 miles). From central Tver, take the old Moscow Highway until you reconnect with the M10, which will turn into Leningradskoe Shosse, then into Tverskaya, the main shopping street, which leads to the Kremlin.



Forward Thinking Left: On the King's Road near the Finland-Russia border. Below: Restaurant Kappeli in Helsinki.



I am in Turku for reasons of geography. Abutting the ocean on Finland's southwest coast, the town is about as far west in the country as you can go without hopping a boat. And with my friend Jason riding shotgun, I plan to drive east across Finland—following a route known as the King's Road—over the border into Russia, and continue on to St. Petersburg and Moscow, Mother Russia's capitals old and new. I love Scandinavia, with its liberal tendencies, rule-abiding civility, and excellent furniture design, and to combine that experience with its complete opposite—a trip by car into Russia, a burgeoning Wild West of a country that I was raised to fear—well, that is a study in contrasts too wonderful to pass up. The King's Road will provide the perfect narrative link.

This route, generally speaking, is the one by which Swedish kings plundered eastward into Russia, and by which Russian czars plundered back after the balance of imperial power shifted. Now heavily promoted by Finland's tourist board, the King's Road stretches from the country's western coast to its Russian border. There are plans to have the Russians extend the road as an official tourist route all the way to St. Petersburg, but Russia has a million things on its post-Soviet to-do list (crush corruption,

build decent highways, secure their nuclear weapons caches) and making brochures for a road-trip route probably isn't near the top of it.

We have been staying in Turku to absorb the mood of the ancients—and to eat some moose casserole at Angels restaurant, where our waitress handed us glasses of glogg, the traditional mulled wine of winter, before we'd even unfolded our napkins. Turku is home to Finland's National Cathedral and to its oldest medieval castle, both of which date to the 13th century. The castle (damaged numerous times, most recently by Russian bombers during World War II) is sprawling and well preserved—and, as a former favorite of Swedish kings, it forms a good western bookend to the trip.

In reality, the King's "Road" is really a route, cobbled together from history, hearsay, and some highways, but more often from byways, which wind through pine and white-birch forests and border muddy fields dotted with Nordic A-frames, country manors, and stone churches. Most likely it follows the old royal postal route: that would explain why it veers so »



Mapping the journey—a picturesque trail of highways and byways.

At the Russian border huge guard towers loom, remnants of a time when this was a very tense crossing point, the exact spot where West became East

often through quaint country villages. For a handful of miles outside of Turku, it joins with Finland's main highway, a pristine four-lane called the E8 that is heavily festooned with air- and road-temperature displays and yellow moose-crossing signs.

Tommi Karjalainen, the Turku resident who took us to Angels the previous night, had warned us about the moose: this being hunting season, the animals are agitated and often on the move. Because I ate moose for dinner and therefore fear karmic retribution, and because every few miles there is a white silhouette of a moose stenciled on the road, I drive carefully—very carefully—and we make it to Helsinki without a single sighting.

IT IS SAID THAT UP TO 80 PERCENT of Finns have saunas in their homes, which makes sense: they invented the things, and their country is so profoundly cold. Seppo Pukkila, a Helsinki photographer and a board member of the Finland Sauna Society, which meets in a clubhouse perched on a peninsula in Helsinki's western suburbs, greets Jason and me in the locker room wearing only a towel. We had debated whether or not to bring bathing suits, and this seems to confirm that our decision—not to—was the right one.

"There are two types of towels at the sauna," Seppo proceeds to tell us. "This large one, which you wear in the common areas, and a smaller one you sit on in the saunas to prevent your ass from



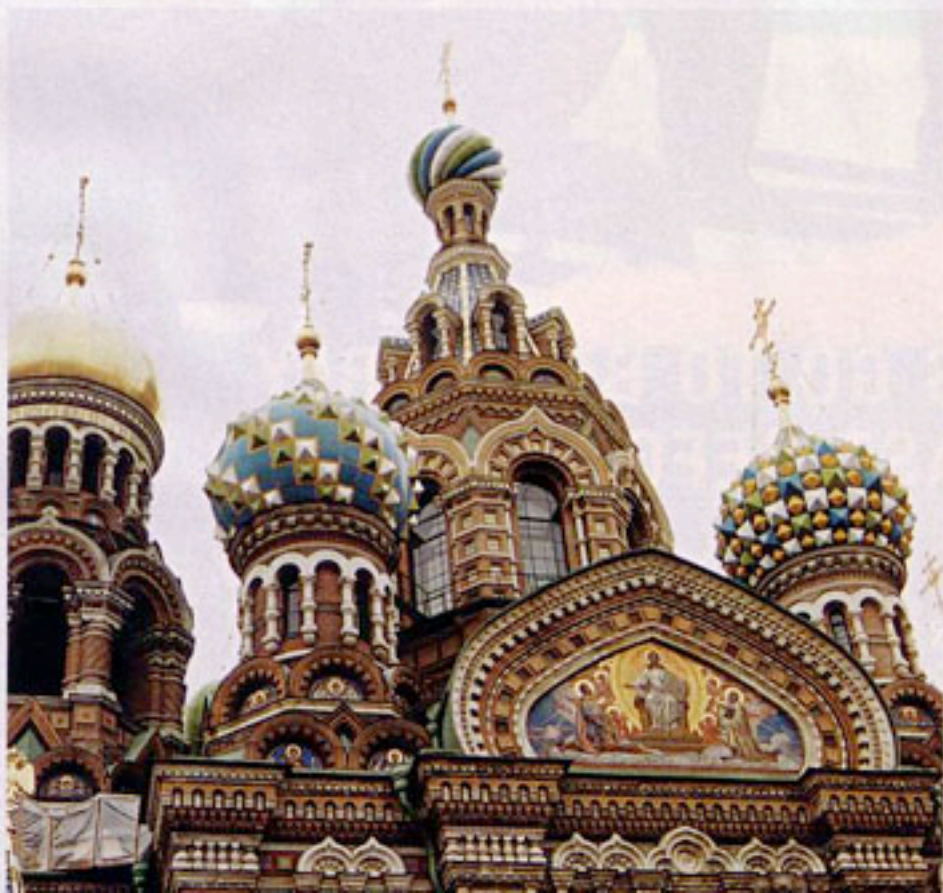
Helsinki's Finlandia Ice Bar, in the city center.

getting burned." I look around for a bath towel. "In Finland, we have no issues with nudity," he says, and hands us two towels about the size of dishrags. "Get undressed." Soon enough, we're sitting inside a dark

room that's lit by a tiny window and is redolent of burnt wood. This is a smoke sauna, the most traditional type, and it's far more authentic than those Ikea-style pine jobs you find at the health club. The Sauna Society is a sort of country club where you go to sweat for sport.

Sitting around us on two levels of benches is a naked slice of Finland's upper crust. On his way out of the room, one member dips a ladle into a bucket of water and drops it on the stove, producing a blast of fresh steam. There is a hiss and almost immediately my skin feels seared, my throat goes dry and my eyes begin to water. The temperature soars and the Finns love it. Seppo says that he and some other diehards had a competition to see who could sit in the sauna through the most ladlings of water. He threw in his tiny towel at 13; the winner outlasted 15.

After one, Jason and I begin to wilt. »



Postcards from Russia The Cathedral of the Resurrection in St. Petersburg, left. Below: Matryoshki for sale at a Russian market.





Russian Classics Above: The Caviar Bar at St. Petersburg's Grand Hotel Europe. Above left: A visitor to the State Hermitage Museum, situated along the Neva River in St. Petersburg.

The Facts

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Kämp Helsinki
29 Pohjoisesplanadi;
358-9/576-111;
www.hotelkamp.fi;
doubles from \$480.

Hotel Astoria
39 Bolshaya Morskaya,
St. Petersburg;
7-812/313-5757;
www.rocfortelhotels.com;
doubles from \$400.

Tver Park Hotel
14 Moscow Hwy.;
7-0822/497-722;
www.parkhotel.ru;
doubles from \$77.

Hotel National
1 Mokhovaya, Moscow;
7-095/258-7000;
www.national.ru;
doubles from \$380.

WHERE TO EAT

Angels
16 Kauppiaskatu, Turku;
358-2/231-8088;
dinner for two \$100.

Caviar Bar
Grand Hotel Europe,
1-7 Mikhailovskaya,
St. Petersburg;
7-812/329-6651;
dinner for two \$200.

WHAT TO DO

Finnish Sauna Society
10 Vaskinientie,
Helsinki; www.sauna.fi;
guest reservations required.

When chatting with most any Finn about what you have done while visiting the country, he or she will surely ask if you have enjoyed a sauna. And it is not until I have that I notice something: along the King's Road, every farmhouse, country house, and manor house has a small wooden building out back with a chimney spewing steam.

OUTSIDE HELSINKI, things get rural again quickly. The King's Road more or less hugs the coast, making tiny loops off of the main road that send us through villages and farm towns. The poster child for quaintness is unquestionably Porvoo, the best-preserved medieval town in Finland. Red storehouses line the Porvoo River, awaiting boats with supplies from the Baltic Sea, and cobblestoned streets pitch steeply up the hill into town.

We overnight in the sleepy port city of Kotka, then cover a particularly beautiful stretch, which includes 20 miles on dirt roads through a wet pine forest, to the Russian border, our trip only half over. Huge guard towers loom, remnants of a time when this was a very tense crossing point, the exact spot where West became East. I don't expect our transit to be seamless, and it isn't. Everyone had assured me that Russian border guards speak English. They do not, nor do they always provide customs forms in English. I spend at least 15

minutes futilely gesticulating at a booth full of implacable guards before a translator is located and we are unleashed upon Russia.

The change in feeling is immediate. The pavement is choppy, the chill heavier, and the shoulder of the M10 is covered on both sides with cups, bags, and other human detritus. It would be hard to find a discarded cigarette butt in Finland, a country so law-abiding that if you cross against a Don't Walk sign you're obviously a tourist.

We have been warned (repeatedly) to watch out for the omnipresent traffic police, known to harass foreigners and relieve them of hefty fines. They are not, however, particularly successful at thwarting Russia's diesel-spewing army of trucks and Ladas, which are all happy to pass us at virtually every opportunity—around turns, with other vehicles barreling toward them, and in one case even on the dirt shoulder.

After less than an hour of bobbing, weaving, honking, and praying, I have fully assimilated myself into this byzantine blood sport, realizing that if I don't play it myself, it'll take us 10 hours to cover the 155 miles to St. Petersburg. In Finland, the roads are so smooth you could cruise in a car made of porcelain; Russian highways only occasionally have sections of smooth pavement, and for the first time I feel justified in having chosen a Land »

Rover for the trip. Though not the best car for drafting behind the Mercedeses with blacked-out windows that frequently kick dust in my face, the Land Rover swallows up the shoddy Russian road.

The route is dead straight on this side of the border, as the landscape transitions from thick pine and birch forests to fields that lie fallow. Like a river of blacktop, the M10 forms the main street of town after town of once beautiful, now teetering wooden peasant homes. Along the roadside, women in babushkas—revelation: it's not a myth—sell pickled beets and potatoes, pots of steaming coffee, folk dolls, and, bizarrely, beach towels, which they hang from rickety lean-tos.

OUTSIDE ST. PETERSBURG, magnificent old dachas tilt and threaten to collapse. Wires illegally tapped into electric lines run across the road and into shanties. These conditions persist right up to the town border, where apartment buildings begin to appear and line the road until the Old City unveils itself.

Czar Peter the Great's bold experiment has held up surprisingly well. Two years ago, St. Petersburg celebrated its 300th birthday, and President Putin spared no expense to brush the grime off of this architectural marvel. Most of the city's more than 1,000 palaces received fresh coats of (primarily yellow) paint, and the polished golden spires of Peter and Paul's fortress in the Neva River glimmer, even in the gray light that makes you feel as if it were perpetually late afternoon.

By five, we've checked into the Hotel Astoria and are preparing, in honor of the road, to eat like kings at the Grand Hotel Europe's Caviar Bar, a sedate room with flawless food and a lounge singer who has already grown tiresome before we have finished our first plate of beluga—a problem easily resolved by stepping up the consumption of Russian Standard Vodka.

And then we sleep like kings.

IF YOU WANT TO GET TECHNICAL, the King's Road actually ends in St. Petersburg, Peter the Great's "window on Eu-

rope" and the seat of power from which succeeding czars ruled over Finland. But since the Russians haven't bothered to get aboard the King's Road Tour Train, I have decided to forge my own modern extension, and push on some 400 miles, to Moscow, with a stopover in Tver, where Catherine the Great used to rest while making the same trip.

Lenin moved the capital back to Moscow to add precious distance from Germany, a tactic that proved prescient. After turning on Stalin, Hitler and his war machine got bogged down in the brutal winter some 19 miles outside of the relocated capital, across from what is today a BP Connect filling station and mini-mart. The Soviets erected a monolith of a memorial there, thrusting up at the gray sky, surrounded by gray walls decorated with the face of a defiant Russian soldier and the dates 1941–1945, known to Russians as the Great Patriotic War.

Past the memorial, a number of old Soviet suburbs line the road. Huge blocks of concrete adorned with story upon

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story of tiny porches covered in hanging laundry. Beyond those, the road widens. Another BP, a Shell station, then a massive—and massively ugly—sportsplex that appears to have been designed by a drunken set decorator from *Lost in Space*. Then the road improves, the building density thickens, and Western stores begin to appear on both sides of the road, their names transliterated into Cyrillic.

Finally, ahead, the red spires and brick walls of the Kremlin—more magnificent than I'd imagined them. According to the maps, our destination, the Hotel National, should be here, at the foot of Tverskaya, in the shadow of the Kremlin walls. We have come this far without speaking Russian, and to miss the hotel, in the center of this huge, sprawling mass of foreign energy, bustling with traffic and traffic police, would be, well...but that's beside the point—we miss it. Caught in a swell of taxis and buses, we push left, and I can come up with only one plan. "All right, my friend," I say. "We're going to have to circumnavigate the Kremlin."

Jason laughs. "That has to be the first time anyone's ever said those words."

We circumnavigate well enough until the Kremlin walls lead us to the Moscow River, which we must cross, and then things get sticky. I make a wrong turn, then panic and pull a U-turn. Bad idea.

WE'VE MADE IT all the way to Moscow without being stopped, passing at least 50 checkpoints and numerous speed traps, and now I see blue lights in the rearview mirror. I've already been warned to not sit in the car and wait to be approached. Russian cops see it as a sign of respect if you get out and come to them, so I open the door and hop into the Lada, handing over my paperwork. "My English," he says. "Very bad." "My Russian," I answer back. "Terrible." Stymied and frustrated, he hands back my papers and waves his hand. "Go."

And then I know we are going to make it. Outside the majestic Hotel National, just a few hundred yards from the gates into Red Square, a bellman moves

aside a rope and points our truck, filthy from dirty roads and diesel fumes, to a prime spot just feet from the hotel's door.

We planned to hop right back in the Land Rover the following morning and begin the two-day return trip, but as we contemplate the hotel bar's rows of fine vodkas, with the twinkling Kremlin behind us and a meal of caviar and blini ahead of us, the thought of more cops, more whizzing Ladas, more swerving trucks is all too much to bear. Plus, this is Moscow, so long a forbidden fruit...

"You are here for just one night?" the smiling desk clerk asks us. Like so many Russian women, she has the chiseled face of a model.

"How far to the border?" I ask Jason, knowing the answer.

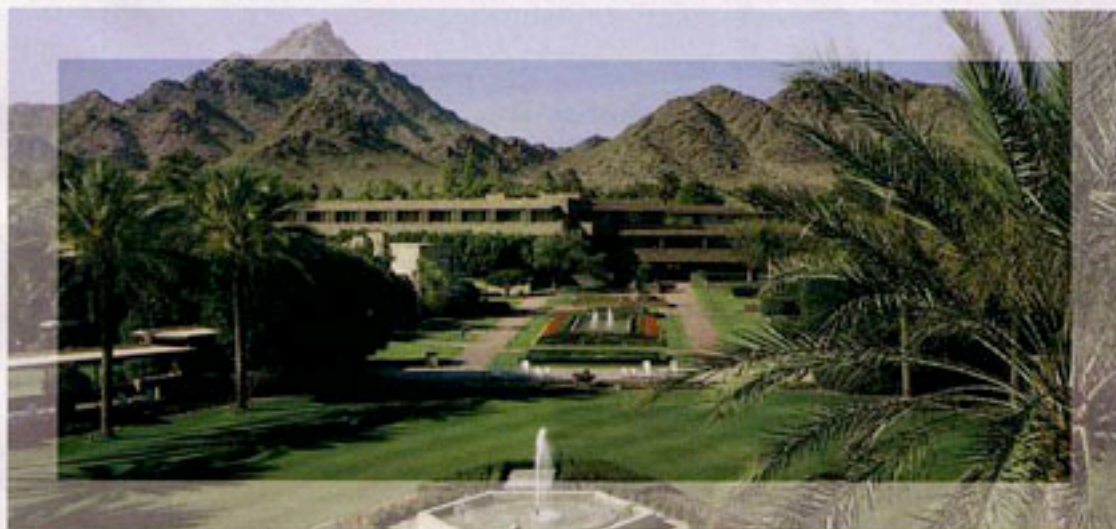
"685 miles or so," he says, catching on.

"We can do it in a day," I say.

I look up at the clerk. "Make that two nights." +

JOSH DEAN has written for *Men's Journal* and *Rolling Stone*.

IN A FLAWLESS SETTING, THE JEWEL OF THE DESERT.



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