



Driving Down Russia's Spine

Paul E Richardson

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On one level, this book is the story of an epic 6000-kilometer road trip from the frigid shores of the Barents Sea to Sochi, Russia's southernmost tip on the Black Sea. Dubbed "The Spine of Russia," the adventure tasked a mismatched duo of Russian and American journalists with capturing a view of Russia from the ground, to collect powerful images and honest human stories that offered a more subtle, complex picture of the world's largest country.

But this book is far more than just a travel essay. For it intertwines fascinating subject profiles with digressions into historical and cultural themes relevant to understanding modern Russia. It is a story told with humor and with the insight derived from the author's three decades of intimate interactions with Russia.

Among the many interesting stories in the book:

- An expedition to "The Well to Hell"
- A music school in one of the most polluted towns on earth
- An energetic youth activist branded as a foreign agent
- Russia's largest manufacturer of barbells (who also makes cloudberry preserves)
- A roadside berry seller recently paroled from prison
- A blacksmith who is a Jehovah's Witness
- A bone-chilling trip to the foundation place of the Russian state
- The slightly off-kilter leader of St. Petersburg's Cossack community
- A retired village doctor who can't stop working, because he won't be replaced
- A piece of Nebraska transplanted into the middle of Russia's Black Earth region

There were also craft beer makers, ballroom dancers, policemen, restaurant owners, an opera student, a priest, a single mother, an accessibility activist, teachers, docents, a best-selling author, soap makers, journalists, a sailor, a winemaker, and a woman taking on the male-dominated world of Russian hockey. And no trip to Russia would be complete without a run-in with security officials in leather jackets. So there is also that.

Taken together, the stories from this epic road trip create a compelling portrait of Russia and its people. The book could not be more timely; recent events show how vital it is for Americans to continue working to understand Russia.

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