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reviews

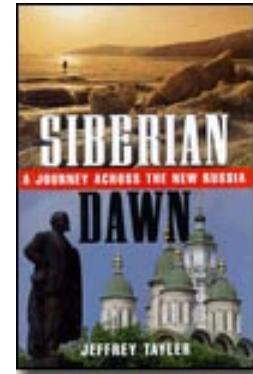


A melancholy view of the 'New Russia'

'Siberian Dawn: A Journey Across the New Russia'

By Jeffrey Tayler

Hungry Mind Press, \$27



Review by [Emily Soares](#)

(CNN) -- Jeffrey Tayler's debut book will make the intrepid traveler both envious of his adventure and grateful that he's the one taking the trip. Compiled from the author's 8,325-mile journey from east Siberia, through the Urals, into the Black Earth zone and on to Warsaw, Poland, bits and pieces of post Soviet Russia flit by in this travelogue as if seen from a quickly passing train. The view is a melancholy one.

"Siberian Dawn: A Journey Across the New Russia" takes the reader through a rough-hewn country being revealed to the outside world -- and to itself -- from out of a historical permafrost. As the book begins, Tayler has quit his Peace Corps job in Uzbekistan to go in search of the real Russia, the one he couldn't escape, he says, "by flashing a fistful of dollars at the doorman of an exclusive hotel." It is early 1993, several years after Perestroika, but Soviet logic still runs the show, with the addition of increased poverty for many and surplus confusion for all.

He starts in Magadan, on the sea of Okhotsk in eastern Siberia. From there his plan is to travel clear to Poland, by any means available. He carries a Moscow-only visa, \$900 in cash and a few possessions: this is not Foder's-sanctioned travel.

What Tayler encounters is a Darwinian landscape of privation and brutal weather

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-- a makeshift world where things work despite all appearances and where it's safer not to ask too many questions. He meets truck drivers who risk death traversing swampy Siberian flatlands, passable only in subzero temperatures; heads of collective farms and factories; taxi drivers; pensioners; new age fanatics in toxic towns; Ph.D.'s in shabby outback discos; and young Russians in despair. Many of these characters seem as dwarfed by the chaos of Russia's incomprehensible changes as by the vastness of their country's landmass.

Without a map, which such a travelogue needs, it's impossible to comprehend how long the trip really is from Magadan to Warsaw, and it seems the region is too big for a single journey to fathom. But Tayler experiences what few have put to paper, and through his eyes, we see parts of Russia that many of her countrymen fear to cross.

Once a place of exile and gulags, Siberia still exacts a rigorous death toll from cancer and toxic poisoning. Tayler stumbles upon rusting and abandoned military-industrial towns, once restricted to the people who lived and worked there. Now residents of these gargantuan altars to Soviet ambition are left living in a visible state of erosion, discolored and sick from toxic water, ground and air.

Clearly, Tayler's trip is not an easy one. As a fluent Russian speaker he passes for a Baltic citizen, but he remains, as the chronic traveler will, a passerby: "Despite all the people I was meeting on my trip across Russia, the journey was a lonely one," he explains. "I was certain to be leaving soon and certain never to return. The transient nature of these acquaintanceships intensified them."

And though he passes through it a rapid pace, Tayler discovers that the inhospitable land he covers is warm on the inside. Off the street, away from the public grind that characterizes Russian life, he finds the keys to survival there: unhesitant hospitality, a love of celebration for any reason and a laugh for the bitterness life regularly deals out.

Considering the journey's many harrowing encounters -- the deadly frost of the Siberian planes, inebriated villagers, grinding bureaucracy, and the mark of a human meal ticket among the hungry -- it's amazing Tayler comes through unscathed. His Russian friends didn't believe he'd make it through alive. But it is said, God protects drunks and babies...and often travelers, who are a little bit of both.

"Siberian Dawn" is a compelling look at a massive nation's messy and uneven transformation. Like all good travel writing, it lets us see places we may never be able to reach ourselves. And it serves as a guided tour thorough a largely uncharted piece of the parallel universe known as Russia.

Emily Soares is a writer at CNN Interactive. She has written for publications in San Francisco, Hungary, and Russia.

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