“In the Footsteps of Vitus Bering”

Report for the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust

Self-portrait in front of the memorial to Vitus Bering.
Nikolskoe, Bering Island, 6 September 2010.

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2010
What I was trying to do

The point was to turn fiction into fact. In considering how to tell the story of Bering’s First and Second Kamchatka Expeditions of the early 18th century, I had crossed Russia many times before I came to make this journey. But those previous journeys were in my imagination and in the words of others. Through the writings of generations of travellers I had – or felt I had – been there and done that. But it is never true. There is a kind of knowledge that comes only from doing it – and, having done it, I can see gaps in what others have written about Vitus Bering and his explorations. Bering set out on an impossible journey in the cold winter of 1725. It took him three years and many struggles to reach Kamchatka. There he built the St Gabriel and sailed north. He ‘failed’ to find America and returned to an indifferent reception in St Petersburg. And then he did it all again. Altogether the two Kamchatka Expeditions occupied Bering for 16 years. I planned (I say ‘planned’…) to do it in a couple of months.

The journey was by the nature of things a little haphazard. I deliberately did not make bookings in advance and nor could I commit to meetings with colleagues and other contacts. The point was, in Bering’s favourite saying, to become ‘a plaything for the winds’. And to see where it led and to understand, perhaps, some of the choices Bering and his expedition made. And, having understood them, I wanted to write and talk about the several themes that emerge from a study of the expedition. These, I would say, fall into two categories. The first is ‘the facts of the matter’; there is a substantial body of work regarding Bering and his expeditions, both in Russia and elsewhere. The genetic source of all this is the logs and official documents of the expeditions together with a number of eyewitness accounts by Steller, Waxell and others. I did not expect to add to this work, but I did think that making the journey – as far as I know no one else has bothered – would provide new and helpful insights into ‘what happened’. The second category is more, for want of a better word, philosophical. Most explorers of the great age of exploration are written about because they succeeded. Bering has the merit, in my eyes, of a more ambiguous record. History has deemed him to have failed on the first expedition (when he lived to tell the tale) and to have succeeded on the second (when he died, cold and in agony, on a remote island in the north Pacific). His two journeys become an allegory of the yearning human spirit and...
of what Tennyson called our desire to “pursue knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.”

By way of background:

I first ‘met’ Vitus Bering in the late summer of 2002. We were introduced by Waldemar, a game ranger at Nalychevo Nature Reserve on the Kamchatka peninsula. I had gone there with a friend, to see one of the world’s last great wildmesses and, in his words, ‘to listen to its silences’. It was in Kamchatka that Bering found the timber to build his ships, the St Peter and the St Paul. And it was in Kamchatka that he founded the city of Petropavlovsk. Some explorers name cities after their wives. Bering named it for his ships.

Waldemar was one of the game rangers sent to greet us. Our helicopter – even now there are no roads – descended from a volcanic sky and nestled in a featherbed of blueberry bushes. The chopper had other places to go and the pilot kept the rotors spinning while we threw our bags to the ground and jumped after them. I stumbled and fell, and found myself looking at the scuffed boots of a tall man with a wide, soft smile. He pulled me to my feet.

“I am Waldemar. I am from Belarus,” he said as the sound of the chopper blades died away. “I am not Russian. And you English?”

“How do you do,” I said. “Menya zovut Sasha.” My name is Sandy – only I was trying to be cute and so I adopted the Russian diminutive for my real name, Alexander. But Waldemar had no time for such niceties.

“Sure, English,” he said. “English boy like you got Russian name? From where? You steal from drunk man, maybe? You hit him on head and take his name. What? You got his money too?”

I liked Waldemar, if only because he spoke English and brought us rhododendron stems (‘good for the liver’) and wild spring onions (‘delicious, like garlic. You try?’) and told us about his time in the Russian merchant navy.

“So this is Kamchatka?” I said, looking around at the white capped volcanoes. “What brings you here?”

“Me, I cannot go home,” said Waldemar. “Ten years I am in Russia! Ten years, but I am poor. I can’t go home. My parents will say, ‘Ten years you have been away! Where is the money?’ To go home I must bring them money.”
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“I’m sorry,” I said.
“Please, English, is always like this. Is Siberia, no? First man here was just like me. He was foreign. He was in Russian navy. And he die here.”
“You haven’t died.”
“Not yet,” said Waldemar. He may have been from Belarus, but he carried a deep Slavic gloom in his soul. “Vitus Bering,” he continued. “Is great man, Bering. Vitus Bering. Danish. He walk ten thousand kilometre. He build ship. He sail to America. He die. Is great man.”

For a while I didn’t think about Waldemar or his hero, Vitus Bering. But sometime later I started to read books and articles. There was Georg Steller’s History of Kamchatka. Steller was one of Bering’s subordinates on the second Kamchatka expedition. His history is one of the earliest written records of the lives of native Kamchadals, Itelmen and Koriaks. There was Stepan Krasheninnikov’s Natural History of Kamchatka researched on the same voyage. There was a flurry of academic articles following the 1991 exhumation of Bering’s grave at Commander Bay in Bering Island. There was a 1729 map of Kamchatka in the British Library ‘drawn to the instruction of Vitus Bering’.

And later I returned to visit Kamchatka, this time in the company of my brother. The peninsula is nine hours and 120 degrees of longitude ahead of Moscow. We took off in the afternoon, but soon plunged into the night. Below us Siberia slipped quietly by. Only the great rivers, the Ob, the Yenisei and the Lena, a ghostly silver in the moonlight, marked the passing hours. I started to tell my brother about Bering. How his instructions were to keep going until he met ‘some European power’ in America. How he crossed the continent. How the rivers were his highways. How he used to mark his position on land just as though he were sailing the very oceans themselves. My voice rising, I conjured up images of the endless taiga, of one heroic man following a distant star across the undulating land.

And my brother, who knows me too well, raised an eyebrow.
“You’re not thinking of doing it, are you?” he asked.
“Well, no, I mean, you know…”
“Jesus, Ingrid will kill you.”

Stepan Krasheninnikov, a brave and thoughtful man
Who was Bering?

A sailor, a Dane, a family man. A Captain-Commander in the service of the Russian Tsar. Reports as to his character vary, but all agree he was a good, kind and thoughtful man. The doubts are whether he was sufficiently ‘strong’ or ‘robust’ or ‘aggressive’ to be the commander of such a large expedition. Certainly he was in the service of the greatest imperialist Russia – or the world – had known since the times of Ivan. But for himself? Did he care? Was he driven? On this, I would say, the jury of his biographers is out. Bering was many things. Orcutt Frost calls him ‘decent’. Steller says he was ‘kindly’. Murphy says he was ‘intelligent and ‘considerate’. Kushnarev says he was ‘weak’. Perhaps he was all of these things. No records exist to explain why Bering took the job. A few months before he had resigned from the Navy. Now, suddenly, he took command of the greatest expedition ever mounted? Why? What drove him?

The suspicion is that it was his wife, Anna, whose letters, according to Frost, reveal her to be “artfully domineering in the family sphere and cleverly insinuating and flattering in the wider world of favour and preferment.” It was Anna who resented his early retirement. It was Anna who sent him back to St Petersburgh to apply to rejoin the navy. It was Anna who, when he got the Siberian expedition, said ‘take it’. And it was Anna who, when he failed the first time, sent him back to do it all over again.

But it was Peter the Great who commissioned him, at least the first time. It was almost Peter’s last act, as he lay on his deathbed, to sign the order setting in motion the greatest voyage of exploration in human history.

The orders Peter the Great signed on his deathbed in January 1725 downplayed the difficulties somewhat:

1. “You are to build one or two boats, with decks, either in Kamchatka or some other place.”

Which was all very well, except Kamchatka (or some other place) was the other side of 6,000 miles of the least hospitable land on earth. There were no roads, no food and no maps. Such settlements as existed were occupied by recalcitrant Cossacks, surly trappers and downright hostile natives.

2. “You are to go in boats along the land that lies to the north, and according to expectations (since the end is not known) it appears that this land [is] part of America.”

Which was a polite way of saying, ‘call us when you get back’. If you get back.

3. “You are to search for that place where Russia is joined to America...”
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But to search is not necessarily to find. Bering had to go back a second time before he ‘found’ America. “History,” says Orcutt Frost, “has not been kind to Vitus Jonnassen Bering.” He, on the other hand, has been very kind to history. His two voyages to the far eastern shores of Russia set in motion one of the great narratives of the modern world. He ‘found, mapped and opened’ Alaska for trade. He made it possible for the Tsars (and later the Soviets) to control one third of the world’s land mass. He took with him scientists whose works are quoted to this day. Because of him the other European (and therefore world) powers took an interest in the northern Pacific. Spain, Britain and France all sponsored voyages of exploration from California to what had become the Bering Straits. As Frost puts it, “What Columbus started in the Caribbean, Bering finished in Alaska.”

How I arranged my travel

This should be a short paragraph. Mostly I read books and learned Russian. The point of the travel was to go and see what I found – which is what Bering did – and to make arrangements as I went. Bering travelled ‘heavy’. He took with him “sixty good carpenters, seven blacksmiths, two coopers, a turner, a stove-setter and all their tools.” hundreds of men, cattle, instruments, anchors, weapons, sails and the wherewithal to build many ships, rafts and barges. He left behind a wife, two sons and a mortgage.

I had only a fishing rod and a couple of changes of clothing, and, of course, a generous grant from the WCMT. The final project will involve some scholarship, but I was not overly exercised about setting up meetings and so on. Most of the people in this field would be on holiday when I was travelling and in any case I could correspond with them at other times. I wanted to focus on the travel. This journey was to retrace a route that Bering used because he didn’t know better and which few would choose to repeat. Essentially he travelled by river (because it was easier to transport his enormous amount of equipment by boat) and he travelled too far north. Today the trans-Siberian railway lies between a sensible 50 and 55 degrees north. Bering travelled mostly at about 60 degrees north. He used 6 great rivers, but with the coming of the railways, they have fallen mostly into disuse. The question was, could I still do it? And what would I learn?
The route

It is easiest to list first the towns and then the rivers. Bering did the journey twice and he used the same route. It was the rivers that dictated where he went. So first the towns: St Petersburg, Perm, Yekaterinburg, Tyumen, Tobolsk, Xanti-Masiisk, Surgut, Tomsk. Then Yeniseisk, and Ust-Ilimsk. From there to Ust-Kut and down the Lena to Yakutsk. Thence to Ust-May (‘Ust’ means river mouth) and over the treacherous mountains to Okhotsk. Okhotsk to Bolshereetsk on the Kamchatka Peninsula and from there out into the wide blue sea. It’s easier, though, to understand the journey as a succession of river trips, for each of which Bering’s men built new boats and barges, sufficient to carry thousands of men and cattle, and many, many tons of equipment and provisions. West of the Urals some used the ‘winter route’ to Perm and beyond. Others travelled some of the way on the Volga. Beyond the Urals they first took to the rivers at Tyumen, sailing down the Tura to Tobolsk, which was then the ‘capital’ of Siberia. From Tobolsk the Irtush took them to the confluence with the first of Siberia’s truly great rivers. The Ob runs for thousands of miles. They stayed with it as far as the Ket, sailing upstream and then turned east again towards Ust-Ilimsk. And, finally they made it to the true Siberian highway, the Lena River. This took them to Yakutsk and on to the confluence with the Aldan. They pressed east into ever more hostile landscapes, and reached the coast at Okhotsk, where they built new boats and sailed first to Kamchatka and then out into the Pacific.

It took years. Bering first left St Petersburg in February 1725. He returned in 1730 to a mixed reception. The second Kamchatka Expedition began in 1732, but Bering did not, finally, set sail for America until the summer of 1741. A few months later he died of scurvy on what is now Commander Island east of Kamchatka. Nearly half a century later (and with the benefits of lime juice) Captain Cook sailed the same waters. It was he who dubbed Bering ‘the Russian Columbus’ and thus ensured his place in history.

Which brings me to a third ‘purpose’ of the journey. We all live with the consequences of Peter the Great’s restless imperialism. It was because of him – and because of Bering – that ‘Russia’, once a modest landlocked principality, became the biggest country in the world. Today it covers one sixth of the world’s land surface. I do not need to rehearse the history of the 20th century here. Suffice it to say that Peter’s instructions to Bering included a felicitous phrase: he was to find out “to what extent we are part of America”. It seemed to me that this was a question as interesting today as it was in 1725 and I was curious to observe how Russians think of America. Are they ‘part of it’? Part of the American century?
Some thoughts on travelling

Travellers become actors in their own dramas and I was no different. I had money and a purpose but I was also defenceless. I was deliberately travelling light, off the beaten path and in ignorance. It was inevitable therefore that I would, in Kate Adie’s phrase, depend on the kindness of strangers. And I did. Altogether I travelled something like 8,000 miles by rail, road and river. I slept in posh hotels, in working men’s hostels, in bus stops and in people’s houses. I supped, as it were, with princes and paupers. And I was met, unfailingly, with curiosity and kindness. For the purposes of my travels I developed a threefold personality which, in Russian eyes, permitted a multitude of eccentricities and, indeed, sins. I was

a) a traveller
b) a writer and
c) English.

Of these three the most interesting for the Russians was ‘traveller’. It is still only very recently that Russians have had the freedom to travel in the way we take for granted. Even now, that right is not universal. There are still parts of Russia to which travel is not permitted. Kliuchi, in Kamchatka, for example, where Bering built his first ship, the St Gabriel, is a ‘strategic town’ (i.e. there is a military base there) out of bounds to foreigners and I was unable to get permission to go there.

The second most interesting was ‘English’. If my experience is anything to go by, Russians are universally Anglophile. In Petropavlovsk, Kamchatka, there is a moving memorial to those who lost their lives in the Crimean War. In 1854 four warships, two British and two French, arrived in Avacha Bay and fired on the small town of Petropavlovsk (named, incidentally, after Bering’s two ships, the St Peter and the St Paul). The memorial commends the courage of those on both sides of this small drama in a greater war and it is characteristic of the Russians that they pay tribute to the courage of their defeated (at least in this battle) enemy.

And thirdly, writer.

- You will write about Russia? they asked.
- Yes.
- And you will tell the truth?
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But that’s a hard promise to make.
- I will say what I saw and what I heard.

I recall, for example, an evening I spent with a self-confessed ‘outlaw’ in a small town far from anywhere. He had refused military service – but Russia does not readily acknowledge conscientious objectors and so, like many of his generation, he was ducking and diving until he was old enough for the military to have forgotten him.

- I am the face of Russia, he said, but don’t use my real name, okay?

But travellers also develop a kind of helplessness. My Russian is not good, but it was good enough. Nevertheless I often found myself at a loss of where to go and what to do. And under these circumstances I became cheerfully useless, ever willing to rely on the kindness of the many strangers I met. Bering did not have this luxury. He was a military commander in the service of the King. What he was not given, he was required to take.

Perhaps the most moving museum display I saw was a set of iron shackles in Ust-Kut. They were included in the Bering display as a matter of course and were a powerful reminder than many of his entourage were press-ganged natives (Kamchadals, Yakutsk and the like) but it also included prisoners working out their terms of imprisonment.

Nevertheless it is with a sense of wonder that I recall the number of times people went far out of their way to help me. When asking for directions to the University in Yakutsk, for example, I happened to meet a woman called Natasha who spent the best part of three days arranging things for me, introducing me to key scholars and taking me to places I would not otherwise have seen.

A traveller must be open to such encounters and must have something to give. It became increasingly clear, the further I went, that one thing I had to give to the Russians I met was stories about their own country. I had seen more of it than most of them had, and learned things that they never knew. But I also appeared as the kind of global citizen that many Russians aspire to become: rooted in England, but at ease all over the world. And yet I recall a conversation with a paediatrician from the small town of Aldan in the very far south of Yakutia. Her name was Lyudmila and we spent 15 hours together on a rough old bus journey from Yakutsk to Tommot. She understood my journey and was curious, but had no desire to travel. She went once to ‘Europe’, by which she meant St Petersburg, but she had never left Russia.

- You must like it here? I asked.
- Very much, she said.
- Forgive me – but please tell me why?
- I feel lucky to be Russian. I feel it in my heart. She is the *rodina* (motherland) and I am part of her.
- Would you like to live in Moscow? In a city?
- Oh, no! There everything is go, go, go. No one has time to talk. No one knows anyone else. Here we all know each other. I know all the families. I know all their concerns.

I told her that I was born in one country but live in another, and that while I am very happy with my home, I don’t quite belong to either country. At first she looked concerned and said she ‘feels pity’ for me. She was sorry for me. She could not imagine what it was to feel like that, like you don’t belong. But then she brightened.
- But you are a citizen of the world! she said.

It didn’t last though. Soon her pity returned and with it her sadness that I did not feel part of a country like she did. Part of a country like Russia.

- There is nothing better, she said. How could there be?

And we travellers can have no answer to that. We can only promise to write it down, just the way it happened.

Travelling is tiring, but I became better at it. From my first stumbling conversations I developed – for want of a better word – a shtick that worked. Altogether I covered something like 10,000 kilometres and I did it in roughly equal proportions in by train, by bus, by river and by air. I rather resented the flights – there were three. The first was from Yakutsk to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatksy. The second was from Petropavlovsk to Bering Island and back again. And the third was to London. But I had no choice. The summer route from Yakutsk to the coast is impassable (Bering did it in winter and lost many men to the bitter cold) and there are no boats travelling from Petropavlovsk to the island. So it was fly or nothing. Mind you, flying wasn’t easy. There were ‘scheduled’ flights once a week in both cases but the ‘schedules’ were a fiction. My flight from Yakutsk was rerouted to Magadan where we spent an involuntary day because Prime Minister Putin was in Kamchatka and they had closed the airport for a couple of days. The flights to and from the island only left when there were enough passengers to make it ‘worthwhile’. This meant, for example, waiting three days
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in Petropavlovsk for more passengers to pitch up. Each morning we were told to gather at the airport at 9.30. Perhaps it will leave, they said. Perhaps... On the fourth day, it did.

Russian trains, by contrast, are wonderful – if you like that sort of thing. They are the great Russian experience. They move slowly, but steadily. They are always on time and they are comfortable enough. Journeys may take days or even a week. You spend time with strangers, sharing food, chatting about this and that, and watching the endless taiga pass by. I made two significant journeys by train. The first was from St Petersburg to Yekaterinburg, from Russia, as it were, to Siberia. The second was from Krasnoyarsk to Ust-Kut. I have fond memories of those journeys.

But the busses? The road to hell isn’t paved with good intentions. The busses gave the impression that the road to hell isn’t paved at all. I travelled from Tomsk to Yeniseisk and from Yakutsk to Tommot and – the company of Lyudmila notwithstanding – both were as dirty, long, unpleasant and uncomfortable as one could wish. Within the towns and cities, by contrast, the busses were cheap and regular and easily navigated, and I used them a lot.

And then there were the rivers. Russia’s dying rivers. I don’t mean dying in the sense of pollution; I mean as transport systems. They are great highways, easily navigated, always there. But they go ‘nowhere’ and they are being replaced by road and rail. It was therefore much harder than I thought to go anywhere by river. The Ob is a case in point. The Ob runs for 2,270 miles, but there is a commercial ferry – a flat barge pushed by a tug – for only one sixth of that distance. It runs from Strezevoi in the north (where the road runs out) to Kargasok in the south (where the road starts again). On the Yenisei there is a ferry that runs from Krasnoyarsk all the way to Dudinka, but Bering never rode the Yenisei. He headed from Yeniseisk straight up the Angara to Ust-Ilimsk. I couldn’t find a boat to take me that route, so I rode the Yenisei as far as Krasnoyarsk and then took a
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train to the Lena. The Lena was different. Here there are no roads – and therefore the ferries have some life. But they are like local busses. To travel the full length of the river takes four journeys, from Ust-Kut to Peledui, from Peledui to Lensk, from Lensk to Olekminsk and – finally – from Olekminsk to the bustling city of Yakutsk. Bering made the journey in 1726 and again in 1735 and it is hard to imagine that it looked any different then to how it looks now. The same words recur: endless, low, hills, trees. Above all, trees. From time to time we passed commercial traffic – barges carrying wood or coal or quarried stone – but mostly we passed nothing but low hills covered in trees. It’s about 1,200 miles from Ust-Kut to Yakutsk. That’s a lot of low hills and a lot of trees.

At Yakutsk it gets even more tricky. There was no river traffic that I could find heading up the Aldan, which is how Bering travelled. The only way to reach Ust-May in summer was to take a bus from Yakutsk to Tommot, and then a ferry from there to the Maya. It ran every four days. But I stopped there. East of Ust-May there are only mine compounds and ghost towns.

- What do you mean, ghost? I asked a friend called Svetlana.
- They have turned the electricity off, Svetlana said. There is no water, no heat, nothing.

The last person to leave, it would seem, really did turn off the lights. In any case there would be no way of getting from Okhotsk to Kamchatka, so I returned to Yakutsk to wait for a plane. The plan took some days to leave – and then it was delayed again. Prime Minister Putin was visiting Kamchatka, and while he was there, the airport was closed ‘for security reasons’.
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**Commander Island**

Bering cherry-picked the ‘best’ (but fatal) bits for himself. Waxell called the second Kamchatka enterprise ‘The American Expedition’, but it may well have been called something like the ‘Expedition for the Total Discovery of Siberia’. Finding America and mapping the seas between the two continents was only one of many purposes entrusted to Bering’s command. They were subsidiary expeditions to explore all of Siberia, including the Amur valley, the Kurile Islands, the deltas of the Yenisei, Lena and Kolyma Rivers and all of Kamchatka. M.A. Michael writing an introduction to Waxell’s book in 1952 suggests that Peter may have been ‘embarrassed’ into it during his travels in Holland and England. “You lay claim to all these lands,” his hosts would have said, “and you don’t even know what’s there?”

But clearly the most glamorous pursuit was the discovery and perhaps colonisation of America and Bering, though an able administrator, was a naval man at heart and saw himself as an explorer. Perhaps he felt the ‘hand of history’ on his shoulder. In any case he kept the ‘best’ for last and for himself and it was under his personal command that the two ships set sail from Petropavlovsk in the later summer of 1741. The journey was, from the get go, a more or less unmitigated disaster. They went the wrong way, they were ravaged by storms, they got scurvy, and were shipwrecked.

Bering was 60 years old when he died on a cold, remote and distant beach.

I finally reached Commander Island at the beginning of September 2010 after 7 weeks travel. The island is as cold, remote and bleak a place as I had imagined. No trees grow there and – if my experience is anything to go by – the sun doesn’t shine much at all. Local guides say there is, on average, fog for 25 days of each month. There is only one town – Nikolskoe – with about 500 inhabitants. Another 100 are scattered across the island. The island is about 100 miles long and perhaps 15 miles wide. Big enough to get lost in – my flight was delayed when it was commandeered by a rescue mission to find a scientist who had been working on the island and has gone missing. A search party and dogs were sent, but a week later there was still no sign of her. Still, the island can hardly support its population. Most people are in government service of one sort or another and it has a subsidised economy. Flights, electricity, apartments are cheaper for this who live here. Sadly this subsidy did not extend to me. Locals paid £200 for a return flight to Kamchatka. I paid 6 times that. For the same price I could have flown from Petropavlovsk to London and back three times. The diet is similarly limited. Basics
(flour, barley, rice, tea, sugar) are flown from the mainland. There are expensive luxuries (chocolate, coffee) if you want to pay. But the real food comes from the land: blueberries for vitamins and mushrooms for flavour. And vast quantities of salmon. One of my contacts works for the fisheries department and, armed with her licence and her rod, I went fishing the first day I was here. The 6 kg salmon I caught with my first cast fed me, my landlady and her husband and the neighbours for the next 5 days.

I had come to Commander Island because it was where Bering died. He sailed from Petropavlovsk in search of America and made one fatal miscalculation. On the first expedition they had sailed north and east, following the Russian coastline and found nothing. They were in fact within a few miles of the Alaska coast, but heavy fog prevented them from seeing – or knowing – that. One the second expedition, therefore, they decided to sail south and east, assuming that to the north east there was only a great ocean. From Kamchatka America is quite hard to miss. It’s there and there’s a lot of it. But the two courses Bering chose were the two that made it possible not to reach America. In the end they made landfall at Cape St Elias and then spent some time dodging islands before the weather and illness sent them heading for ‘home’. Bering never made it. By the time a storm wrecked the ship at Commander Bay on the northern coast of the island, Bering (along with many of his crew) was suffering badly from scurvy.

It is hard to imagine the mixture of hope and despair that the sight of this land would have brought to Bering and his crew. Many, one supposes, were in any case hoping for death to release them from their suffering. For some, the wish was granted.

Bering died on 8th December 1741 and was buried with some sort of ceremony. “His corpse was tied fast to a plank and thrust down into the ground. None of the other dead was buried with a plank,” says Waxell. He then took command and, somehow, some survived the winter. They lived mainly on sea otter and on the body of a dead whale which had washed up on the shore. Gradually the scurvy abated and by March those who survived could walk again. Under Waxell’s direction they broke up the St Peter and recovered enough wood to make a smaller, seaworthy craft. They laid the keel at the beginning of May and the ship was ready to sail by the end of July. They set sail on 13th August 1742 and – how quickly one travels when one knows where to go – they reached Kamchatka on the 17th. Ten days later they were safely in Petropavlovsk.
The Lives of Others

I met many people along the way and made some friendships that will endure. Very few of those I met spoke English. Of all those with whom I spent time only Natasha in Yakutsk, Natasha (a different Natasha; it became a sort of game to guess which of the 10 most common names any particular Russian would have) in Nikolskoe and Slava in Tyumen spoke more English than I spoke Russian. Almost all my conversations, therefore, were in Russian. When I set off, I imagined there would be several themes on which I would concentrate. In no particular order I thought these would be:

- Bering, his travels and what they meant
- The two Russian revolutions (1917 and 1991)
- Russia’s place in the world and relations with ‘the West’, particularly America.

And so on. It soon became clear that this was silly. If you want to know about ‘Russia’s place in the world’ there are learned journals and newspapers you should read and learned institutes and policy officials with whom you should speak. What ordinary Russians know about – ‘ordinary’ in the sense that they are the people you meet on trains, busses and barges in Siberia – is themselves. Their houses, jobs, incomes. Their hopes, desires, dreams and fears. In short, their lives. And so quickly I developed a different set of themes, some of which were more tangential than others to my main purpose. Again, in no particular order:

- I seemed to have many conversations directly or indirectly about the military, about the experience of young men in the army, about mothers and sons, about wars Russia has fought. Partly this is because Russia has a vast propaganda machine devoted exclusively to glorifying the victorious defence of the motherland in the ‘Great Patriotic War’ of 1941-1945. And partly it is because it interests me. I have been a conscientious objector and paid a modest price for it and I was interested to talk to many young men about their experience of conscription and, sometimes, their refusal to serve.
- For many Russians one great and direct consequence of the ‘post-Soviet times’ (they don’t call it a revolution) of 1991 has been the freedom to travel. Few I met had been to the United Kingdom, but many had holidayed abroad. Egypt and Turkey are the most popular destinations and (the further east you go) China and Vietnam.
- Is it better now? It seems such a crass question, but for people who have lived through a time of change it is an obvious and immediate one. The answer, more often than not, was no – but a qualified no. Some things are better, but Russia’s brutal move to the free market is not regarded as an unqualified success. I am not sure I believed the ‘naysayers’. I found a vibrant, optimistic, changing country. Would anyone really go ‘back’? I doubt it.

A Word about Museums

I spent a lot of time in museums, looking at the curious way in which Russia chooses to remember itself. The museums were almost always completely empty of
visitors, but for me. In part this is because it was summer, but it is also, I think, because they are curiously dispiriting. Like the worn statues of Lenin that grace the main squares of every town east of the Urals (I found not one single exception; even Nikolskoe on Commander Island has its Lenin. He is higher up the hill, but less well maintained than Bering...) they tell a story that is at best partial and at worst deliberately disingenuous. But there were surprises. In Ust-Kut the Bering cabinet included a set of shackles used on the forced labourers that formed a key part of the expedition and that tempered the many reports of Bering as a ‘kind’, ‘gentle’ and ‘soft’ man. In Petropavlovsk there was an original anchor from one of Bering’s packet boats and in Nikolskoe Natasha gave me the addresses of Bering’s descendants now living in Moscow and Alaska.

Scholarship on Bering is confined to small pockets in St Petersburg, in Denmark, in Minnesota. But again there were surprises. In Yakutsk, Natasha introduced me to people working on native accounts of the expeditions, a view that has hitherto been entirely absent from histories of the expeditions and their impact. But the main idea of the journey was not scholarship, but to do what Bering did and in so doing to understand a little more about his choices – and mine.

Turning Fiction into Fact?

Peter Fleming, brother of the more famous Ian, wrote a book about the fate of Admiral Kolchak, one of the ‘White Army’ leaders in Siberia during the civil war. In his introduction he makes some telling sallies against western view of Russia: ““On the one hand you have the crusty majority, who believe it to be a hell on earth; on the other you have the half-baked minority who believe it to be a terrestrial paradise in the making. Both cling to their opinions with the tenacity, respectively, of the die-hard and the fanatic. Both are hopelessly wrong.” I am, of course, inclined to agree.

The Polish journalist, Mariusz Wilk gives a different kind of warning. Writing about the several years he spent living on the Solovki Islands in the White Sea, he is very harsh on westerners who come to Russia and think they know anything: "...ever since Russia has been written about, apart from the problem of language, there has been the problem of transference from one cultural code to another.... Europeans who write about Russia today rarely go beyond the trivialities which were first formulated in the first half of the 16th century." I’ve read an awful lot of this stuff and I have to concede his point. There is a type of book written by westerners about Russia which is little more than the recycling
of those 16th century stereotypes: drunk, lazy, garrulous, mistrustful, violent and venal men. Grasping, beautiful, promiscuous women. Landscapes too huge to imagine. A deeply sentimental, deeply authoritarian culture, and so on.

These stereotypes endure because they have some basis in ‘fact’. But Wilk is right to chastise us. There is more to Russia and it behoves us to look for it. It is, however, not easy. In his introduction to the Kolchak book, Peter Fleming gives a further warning. The history of Siberia, he says, is ‘a bog. Across this bog it is necessary to pick one’s way; but when one puts a wary foot down on what looks like a fact, the fact immediately ceases to be valid and sinks under one. The bog heaves. Distracting bubbles appear...’

I met many distracting and entertaining bubbles on my travels, but throughout I was surprised to find that my interest in Bering grew, rather than diminished. His expedition, particularly the second, is without parallel in all of human history. Columbus sailed with three small boats. Bering took 10,000 men. Bering spent 16 years on his epic quest. In some respects it must be regarded as a failure. The last stage, in particular, the voyage from Petropavlovsk, was, but for the sighting of ‘America’ at Cape St Elias, a parody of ‘successful’ exploration. Only Steller’s extraordinary intelligence and determination and Waxell’s courage and leadership in bringing home the remnants of the stricken ship, give the journey a veneer of credibility. Most accounts focus, as Waxell’s and Steller’s did, on those last few months at sea. If anything, my travels have taught me that the great triumph of Bering was to get the whole expedition to Yakutsk at all and to get some of his men and provisions from there to Okhotsk. It would have been far quicker and easier to have gone to Kamchatka by sea, via Cape Horn and the Indies. But that was not the point. The point was for Peter and his successors to know the land over which they purported to rule, and for this alone, they considered the expeditions a great success.
In the Footsteps of Vitus Bering

For me too. I was pleased to have been able to do what I set out to do. I am delighted to have sailed the rivers that were Bering’s Highways. I doubt many have done what I have done. I would have liked to sail to America – but this was not possible. There are shipping fleets based out of Petropavlovsk but they do not make land in Alaska. Similarly the American, Japanese and Korean fleets have no reason to call in Petropavlovsk. And if they do they are not willing to take unknown travellers of dubious purpose as their passengers. Flying, too, proved impracticable. It is possible to fly Petropavlovsk – Vladivostok – Seoul – Anchorage, but it is a lot quicker and cheaper to go the long way round via Moscow and Chicago. I left that journey for another day.

And yet the fiction remains a fiction. The stories we tell are not quite the journeys we make. Fleming’s slippery facts remain as elusive as ever. On the Ob one evening, when the clouds and the river and the sky seems to blend into one I found myself struggling for something on which to focus my camera.

Vitus and Me

It was Natasha, a university lecturer in Yakutsk, who gave me the hardest time about my ‘method’ and my ‘purpose’. She is half Russian, half Yakut and can track her Russian antecedents back to the early Cossacks settlers. All of which is background to her reprimand:

- What you do is not good research, Natasha chided me. It is not scientific. Everything I tell you is subjective. It is not the truth. You cannot treat what I think like it is the only truth. And also, I know how journalists work. You tell them things and then when you read what they have written, and how they have put what you said in their words, you don’t recognise yourself.

And I had to come up with an apologia pro vita mia:

- No, well, I am not a historian, I said. I am not writing ‘the truth’ in that sense. The reason I am making the journey is not to find out what it was like for Bering but because I want to know what it is like for me. So the book will be about Russia and about Bering and about people I meet like you but in the end it will be really about me. What I saw. How I felt. Why I matter. I’m sorry, but it’s not about you.
Except it is. On Commander Island my landlady, Natasha (another Natasha...), came from the small town of Zaporozho, in the Cossack heartland of the Ukraine. Repin’s painting of the Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks to Sultan Mehmed IV of the Ottoman Empire is a moving and funny characterisation of these men, but it speaks to a historical epic that has lasted centuries. Those same Cossacks were the cutting edge of Peter’s empire. Their children’s children live now in all across Siberia. Russia is not a ‘natural’ country. Its borders are fluid. There are natural boundaries to east, north and south, but even these have proved moveable. For a century and a half Alaska was part of Russia. And to the west? As Richard Pipes says, Russia is a very moveable feast, its borders flowing this way and that, like the Ob in the spring flood. But there it is, a vast, wealthy sprawling presence in the modern world. It is as well we should know it and understand it. And that is my challenge now: not so much to write about my travels, but to make the story of this journey, of Bering’s journey, a narrative of his and our times. The point of the journey was to give history a currency it would not otherwise have. As much as anyone Bering gave expression to the universal desire to pursue knowledge like Tennyson’s sinking star. The ambiguity of his position in history – success? failure? – is what makes him interesting. His relative anonymity and the enormous consequences of his explorations are what make him worth writing about. In the context of Russia’s position in the world today, how little we know – and how much it matters – it is a story worth telling and I am grateful to be in a position so to do.

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September 2010