

# Rough Stuff or Golden Ring?

A different cycling experience: a familiarly warm welcome  
by Stephen Dyster, in correspondence with Vladimir Filippov of the RCTC



A faint track, barely distinguishable from the surrounding boulders and slabs so strewn is it with rock debris; some heavily laden drop-handlebar touring bikes are being propelled slowly and carefully along the narrow way; soon a group of riders pause for a spell and take a photo of the group at the top of the pass. Could be the Rough Stuff Fellowship out on a jaunt, except that in the background stand the perpetually snow-clad peaks of the Tian Shan mountains, the pass is at 4028 metres

above sea level and the cyclists are members of the RCTC, the Russian Cyclists' Touring Club. This is their tour of Kyrghizia in 1992 and the crossing of the Sujek Pass. This is cycle touring in the raw. A quick flick through the photo report on their website shows cycles being carried around landslips and across, even along, rivers; "sometimes it is easier than cycling uphill." A couple of years ago, it was reported in several newspapers that the popularity of Vladimir Putin, then President, now Prime Minister,

had been boosted beyond belief amongst female Russians when photos of the bare-chested politician, angling, thigh-deep in a Siberian river were published. It seems that they appreciate man the hunter in a all his ruggedness. Well, there are clearly elements amongst the RCTC who would fit the bill, too, though not all their tours are quite so adventurous.

However, as Vladimir Filippov, President of the RCTC, said, cycling is not popular amongst most Russians, although Russia has



been described, by British riders who have taken advantage of the hospitality offered by the RCTC, as “the ideal cycling destination.” Yet, few Russians could name a single cycle racer and there is no coverage of the sport on television, according to Vladimir. He puts this contradiction down to a number of factors, but largely to socio-economic reasons affecting the way cycling is perceived; “In Russia, as in most poor

countries, bicycling is regarded as the business of poor people. We have a cult of cars, even though the average car speed in Moscow is about 5 km per hour on working days.” This is understandable and follows a pattern seen across the world in both past and present. Maybe the east can learn something from the mistakes of the west in allowing car dependence to become the norm. Weather also plays its part, though

road conditions can be “mad” at any time of year. Vladimir, himself, does not use his bike for commuting, though part of the RCTC’s activities involve campaigning for cycling infrastructure. At present this is negligible, though some smaller towns and cities have made some progress, through the auspices of enlightened local administrations and businesses. Vladimir cites Uglich, Dubna and Privolzhsk as good examples of this, though such are few and far between.

Not as bad as when the five or so cyclists in Moscow were banned from the streets in 1881, a James McGurn points out in “On Your Bicycle”. Cycle racing came to the rescue, when the governor of the city was converted, after watching some cycle races, and lifted the ban. By 1896 the numbers of the Moscow Society of Velocipede Lovers were in the thousands. The Tsarevich, later Tsar Nicholas II, was keen, though that can hardly be the reason for Trotsky’s hostility towards the bicycle on the grounds that it was bourgeois. One remarkable tour of the USSR, was undertaken by five army officers who rode a circuit of the entire Soviet Union in 1926: Trotsky had been dismissed as Commissar for War a year before. There was even a target for bicycle production at the time of the first Five Year Plan aimed at dragging Soviet industry, whatever the



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human cost, into the twentieth century. By the start of the Great Patriotic War in 1941 some half a million bicycles were being made each year.

Nowadays, the RCTC is Moscow based, with most of its sixty full members living in the city. There are other touring clubs in some provincial cities and towns, as well as other cycling clubs in the capital. Some have banded together to form the “Interregional Social Organization of Cyclists” or “Bicycle Transport Union”. Their aim is to campaign for cyclists’ rights as well as cycling facilities. “It was, even, better in the Soviet era,” comments Vladimir, when asked about government support for cycling; “campaign” is my word, “struggle” was his. “There are probably a few hundred active, organized cyclists in Moscow. For more than twelve million citizens it is not many. According to statistics there are four or five million bicycles in Moscow. But most people keep them in a garage and ride in the park maybe once a year.” Sounds familiar? There is clearly a strong cycle owning base to build on, but it is easier said than done when government does not take a lead.

There are few road regulations that either promote or restrict cycling. The traffic code does not demand that cyclists wear helmets, just that they don’t ride two-abreast or more than one metre from the edge of the road, for example. These rules seem to apply in towns or where roads are busy, but the RCTC website has plenty of examples of quieter roads with no traffic whatsoever and cyclists three abreast.

A glance at the photos shows that this is a club with a broad appeal that crosses age and

gender. Vladimir believes that the distinguishing feature of RCTC, apart from the love of exploring by bicycle, is an educated background. Most Russians could afford a bicycle and there is as much variety amongst the machines as there is amongst the riders. Vladimir’s personal preference for drop-handlebar tourers or hybrids. However, there is, he says, a move amongst many Russian riders to – you’ve guessed it – ATBs with front suspension. “Perhaps they think it looks cool.” In fairness, in a country where there are many miles of unsurfaced roads, front suspension might well be a more reasonable provision than it is in most cases for road touring in the UK.

The RCTC is keen to encourage cyclists from all over the world to visit Russia.

Vladimir Filippov sees several factors that discourage some cyclists. Above all, Russia is different – it is one thing to learn a bit of a new language, quite another to learn a whole new alphabet. “Not many people, especially in the countryside, can speak English,” moreover “people think that it is dangerous in Russia, which is not true.” Many things are different from Western Europe; “not many quiet, good tarmac roads; the rouble exchange rate is not good; there are no organised camping sites,” adds Vladimir. Of course, these may be problems, but there are corollaries which could be distinct advantages. Vladimir lists these: “vast areas of unexplored territory; friendly people; lots of wildlife; if you like off-road cycling far from civilization, you can find lots of places to go; you can put a tent anywhere.” The off-roading isn’t necessarily technical stuff, there are miles of forest tracks and gravel or mud roads, which will take the rider deep into the countryside. Even on busier roads or in settlements, Vladimir is keen to point out, you will find a welcome amongst the people and road rage is something he has never experienced. He feels that “most people consider us as little bit strange, but I have never encountered any hostility from drivers towards bicyclists on the road.” Well, there would be many in the UK who would happily accept being thought strange in return for being allowed to get on cycling. Those who have experienced Russia echo Vladimir’s view that Russia has much to offer the touring cyclist with a desire for adventure and novelty.

The RCTC runs several accompanied tours for foreigners, enticing them with the promise of, “ancient cities in the historic





heartland of Russia, and its secluded corners rarely seen by tourists . . . breathing the fragrances of field and forest . . . personal contact with ordinary Russians; at work . . . gathering water from their wells, in Russian steam baths, drinking tea in their homes . . .” And those who have been have not been disappointed. There are different types of tours. The most popular, and that which Vladimir recommends, is the Golden Ring of Russia, the area to the north-east of Moscow, including the cities of Vladimir and Jaroslavl – historic Russia at its best. The choice is of tour length, type of accommodation and how adventurous one feels. But there are other tours to more remote areas, such as Lake Baikal where adventure is very much the order of the whole trip. The website has pictures of riders crossing empty landscapes, bereft of the least hint of habitation. Never fear, though, these are resourceful hosts. Take the self-made cycle trolleys made in 2003 to ride along the Circum-Baikal Railway. Pairs of bicycles held in place by wooden poles, skilfully fashioned, and lashed together by ropes. Brilliant. Details of the tours are on the website. If you don't have access to the internet, then contact CW and the editor will happily print out details for you. Of course, Vladimir speaks English, too. The RCTC will hep

with visas, by inviting you to come to Russia, bicycle hire – if you want it – and some other travel arrangements. If you like they will even arrange bespoke guided tours in Russia and its former Republics, including sag-wagon.

So why is the Golden Ring his recommendation for a first taste of cycling in Russia?

1. Most famous and interesting places with lots of museums and historic spots.
2. Not far from Moscow, with easy access.
3. There is tourist infrastructure (unlike other parts of Russia).
4. There are some quiet, but tarmac roads.
5. The Volga River.”

I asked Vladimir about the epic notion of cycling across Russia, a sort of LeJog on the Cecil B de Mille scale. He was not enthusiastic. “In my opinion it would be a rather boring thing to do,” though there are people, both native and foreign, who have done it and their stories are on the website, too. He also pointed out that it would be hard work as the route to Magadan has extensive unpaved sections – hundreds and hundreds of long kilometres – though the route to Vladivostock is expected to be paved by the end of 2009.

Of course you could tour independently. Vladimir points out that Russia is not a dangerous country to visit, though there are areas which they do not recommend, for example cycling in the Caucasus region, at present. Indeed, it sounds like you'll get a warm, if curious, welcome. That said, Russia, especially outside the major cities, does not have an extensive tourist infrastructure, so local knowledge comes into play, paving the way for future solo exploration. For the independent cyclist they'll offer information and may even have members who'd like to join for all or part of the trip. You can stay with RCTC members in Moscow, join a tour and look forward to hosting RCTC members and showing them something of your territory, when the opportunity arises. If you are in Moscow, join a weekend ride (the season runs from April to October), or drop in on Thursday evenings at 19.00 at Bolshoy Trehsviatitelsky per. 1 entrance 3, Moscow 109028, Russia. If you can't make it, take a look at [www.rctc.ru](http://www.rctc.ru) Russia may be a new experience for riders from the west, but it sounds as if the sociability and friendliness of other cyclists will quite familiar.

The editor is indebted to Vladimir Filippov. Without his ability to speak English and generosity with his time, the writer would not have got very far!