

# Siberia:

## 4 months in the Sakha Republic with the Dolgan and Even nomads

Siberia covers 67 percent of the Russian territory and is populated by over 30 indigenous ethnic groups. Sakha is its largest Republic, covering 3,100,000 sq. km., i.e. ten times the size of Italy, but it has only one million inhabitants. Half of it is located beyond the North Pole Circle and it is fully within the permafrost area, i.e. where the



... "I look for the least densely populated areas on Earth. To my mind Siberia is not a synonym of gulags, nuclear experiments, military secrets, historical facts or remarks made by those who are afraid of it and base their opinions on its recent past... Siberia is only a white terrific huge empty region still silent and unexplored, where I go to meet the God of the cold and the few heroes in the world who can still tackle and defeat him. Men and women with crystal minds, who are clear-sighted, have strong feelings and dignified thoughts... There is always something I can learn from them on the art of living"...  
[Newton, June 2006]

soil is permanently frozen. The active surface layer, i.e. the layer which thaws during the Summer and freezes again in the Winter is approximately 3 meter deep, whereas the layer which has been permanently frozen since the latest Ice Age approximately 10,000 years ago varies in depth from 300 to 1,500 meters. It is not by chance that the village of Oimyakon, in Yakutia, hosts the



"Pole of Cold", the coldest inhabited area on Earth, where the temperature drops as low as - 71°C.

The nomadic inhabitants of Dolgan used to be hunters and today rear reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*). The population amounts to no more than 7330, 70 % of whom live in the Taimyr peninsula and the



rest in the Anabar district, in the Republic of Sakha (former Yakutia).

Their herds produce leather and meat, which are sold all over Siberia. There are over 20,000 reindeer in Yakutia. Each of the several "brigades", i.e. the clans of breeders, owns 3000. Despite the collapse of the USSR and the "communes", most families living in the tundra receive a salary from the Government, who still today owns the reindeer and wants to keep a territory very rich in oil and diamonds under control (99% of the diamonds mined in Russia, i.e. one fourth of the world production, come from Siberia). The nomads own 20-30 reindeer at most and hunt wild reindeer to eat. If, as is often the case, the wolves kill animals that are property of the Government, the Dolgan population must pay money to compensate for the loss.

However, the Russian Federation today encourages a certain degree of



independence of the local peoples.

The Dolgans are a unique people because they live in baloks, wooden houses built after those of the first fur traders in Russia. Their size is 4 x 3 metres, they host 4-5 people and contain two or three single beds or a large double bed, a small window that is blocked with reindeer skin, a table and a stove. During the winter the nomadic people leave from the northern arctic coast, move south and camp not too far from the northern boundary of the coniferous forest, a source of firewood: when the reserves are depleted, they travel from 10 to 12 hours a day at -50°C. Three days travelling by sledge are necessary to find clean frozen lakes from where ice is obtained to have the water necessary for cooking. The Dolgans love open spaces: their baloks simply ensure their survival. Their real home is the endless horizon, which they always bear in their hearts: beyond the horizon there is always the void, which they never fear. Every morning they use their lassos to capture the few reindeer still in the camp site, tie them to the sledges and reach the moving herd to take the animals back to the camp site. One day the reindeer move too far: it is time to go. During the winter, the Dolgans move their camp site every fortnight.

The nomadic people cook and eat reindeer meat, which is light and very good, and straganina, frozen raw whole fish which is dipped in salt. However, the real delicatessens of the tundra are frozen raw reindeer kidneys and liver.

Candles are lit in the evening. Anufri junior comes to my balok. I ask him: "If you could leave, what place would you like to visit?" "Paris!" Anufri answers with no hesitation. "Why Paris?" "When I was in the village of Yuriung Khaia, I once saw a TV documentary on the Eiffel tower and I would like to climb on top to discover what it is like to see all the lights of a large city from above..." Tomorrow is Karal day, i.e. when the reindeer are counted; many men have come to sleep here from other camp sites to help Ivan and his family. Everyone expresses his or her secret wish: Ivan, the chief of the camp, would like to see the Pyramids of Egypt, Zinaida would rather meet the Lapps and compare and contrast their reindeer...

I grow curious and ask: "If you were given a job in one of those places, would you go?" Complete silence. Ivan raises his head and becomes the spokesman for all. He looks into my eyes and with astonishing certainty states: "We shall never leave our reindeer".

## DEBATE

---

Look at it carefully! A geographical map always has many colours indicating mountains and plains, seas and rivers, volcanoes and islands, glaciers, deserts and all the rest... This was how the Earth was and is.

To survive, the first living creatures learnt to adapt to these different features of the land. This is how variety was created, spontaneously. In every form of life.

I want to imagine a moment, in the history of the world, in which different creatures could live peacefully together.

Perhaps the deterioration of this garden of harmony began as people evolved and no longer had only to worry about surviving. They found they had the time to consider their differences as something to vaunt and use as a form of power...

Dear children

Do you like the fact that there are many populations different from yours in the world? Why do you like it or not like it?

How do you think these populations are "different"?

Do these differences make you afraid or do they make you curious?

Is a "different" person less important than you and your usual friends?

How would you react if a Siberian child were to enter your class now?

What would you tell him or her? What would you ask him or her about?

