



River of No Reprieve: Descending Siberia's Waterway of Exile, Death, and Destiny

Jeffrey Tayler

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One of today's most intrepid writers chronicles a deadly trek through the legendary region that gave birth to the gulag and gave Siberia its outsize reputation for perilous isolation.

In a custom-built boat, Jeffrey Tayler travels some 2,400 miles down the Lena River from near Lake Baikal to high above the Arctic Circle, recreating a journey first made by Cossack forces more than three hundred years ago. He is searching for primeval beauty and a respite from the corruption, violence, and self-destructive urges that typify modern Russian culture, but instead he finds the roots of that culture—in Cossack villages unchanged for centuries, in Soviet outposts full of listless drunks, in stark ruins of the gulag, and in grand forests hundreds of miles from the nearest hamlet.

That's how far Tayler is from help when he realizes that his guide, Vadim, a burly Soviet army veteran embittered by his experiences in Afghanistan, detests all humanity, including Tayler. Yet he needs Vadim's superb skills if he is to survive a voyage that quickly turns hellish. They must navigate roiling whitewater in howling storms, but they eschew life jackets because, as Vadim explains, the frigid water would kill them before they could swim to shore. Though Tayler has trekked by camel through the Sahara and canoed down the Congo during the revolt against Mobutu, he has never felt so threatened as he does now.



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