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Searching for Mammoths on Taimyr

By Gregory Feifer

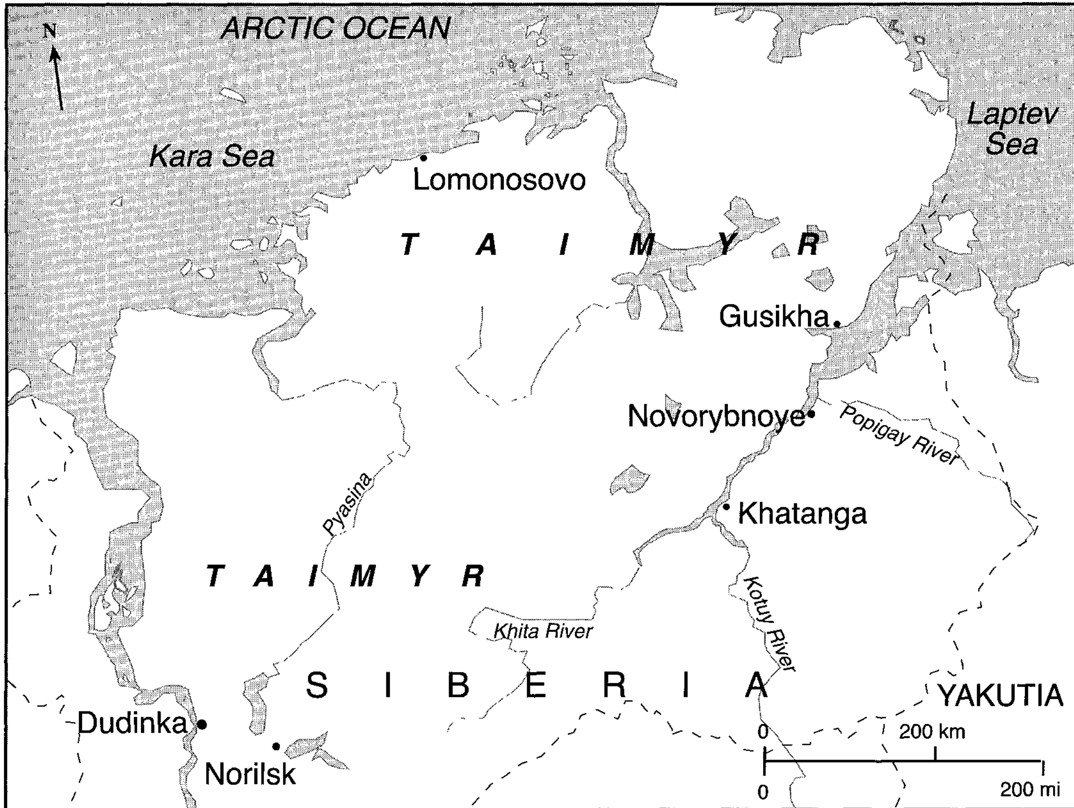
October 2000

KHATANGA, Northern Siberia–The world's northernmost forest, well inside the Arctic Circle, looks more like a sprawling patch of widely spaced shrubs than a real forest. It is punctuated by depressions and tiny meandering rivers that for two green months of summer carry water from mosquito-laden swamps. In October, the stunted larches eking out a living on top of the permafrost are barely visible through the snow.

The world's northernmost forest, at a latitude of around 72 degrees north, looks like a snowed-in shrubbery orchard

I sat high above, in an ancient, round-bellied, soot-covered Mi-2 helicopter rattling its way north. Leaning against a dusty burlap bag and mesmerized by the landscape, I felt none of the minus 27 degrees Celsius, made rawer by icy wind whipping through an open window. Suddenly, there were no more trees, just an endless expanse of frozen tundra covered with ice and snow. The light from the haze-covered golden sun played off the frozen expanse below, and a pale blue sky above stretched to the white horizon. Herds of wild reindeer occasionally charged this way and that, little specks running from the helicopter's churning sound. Lone dog sleds made their way through the snow nearby. These belonged to native nomadic Dolgan tribesmen, a group of 5,000 souls who live exclusively on Russia's Taimyr Peninsula, a frozen part of Northern Siberia jutting into the Laptev Sea.

Windstorms cropped up occasionally, blocking off all view with an impen-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etrable wall of fine snow whipped up from below. My attention turned to my companions inside. Most, bundled in down and Gore-Tex, leaned against two large, dirty cylindrical canisters of kerosene fuel taking up most of the interior. Occasionally, someone would come back near where I sat to light up a Marlboro and flick its ashes through my window, inches from the dubious-looking fuel drums.

I had joined an expedition led by an eccentric Frenchman to find a brigade of Dolgans who had spent part of the summer combing the tundra for the remains of woolly mammoths. It was the last group of several to report in — all the others had already turned in their finds. This group wasn't easy to find. Its members were not where they'd reported they'd be through another Dolgan group that had made its way to Khatanga, the chief settlement on Taimyr that served as the expedition's base.

An aerial view of Novorybnoye, 150 kilometers northeast of Khatanga on the Khatanga River below its confluence with the Popigay River.

Bernard Buigues, the expedition leader, a bald man in his forties with a weather-beaten face crinkled around smiling eyes, decided to set the helicopter down by the settlement of Novorybnoye, where a number of Dolgans still lived after having been forced to adopt a sedentary way of life during the Stalin era. The village looks like a barracks, a collection of about 20 corrugated-metal shacks near a diesel generator perched on the edge of a wide meteor crater. Small boats frozen into the snow around the settlement made the moonscape even more surreal.

As the helicopter descended, its wheels bumping on the ground a few times before settling down, what seemed like the entire village came out to the noisy machine. The helicopter's occupants straggled out, eyed by a group of around thirty Dolgans, some wearing clothes of reindeer hide, others an array of mismatched Russian-made attire.

Buigues asked whether anyone knew where the brigade for which we were looking might be. But the Dolgans had their own business. A short, weathered woman in a massive Arctic-fox fur hat held up a collection of reindeer bridle bits made from mammoth ivory found on the tundra.

After the helicopter lands and its occupants straggle out, Novorybnoye's Dolgans surround us. They're curious, but not awestruck; one of Khatanga's two helicopters lands here around once a week.

"Two thousand five hundred rubles," she announced in surprisingly good Russian. It came to a little less than $100, a large sum for anyone living on the Taimyr Peninsula. One American moved closer. "You're rich, you can afford it," the Dolgan coaxed, smiling.

"That's a lot, and it's not as if she has a lot of customers," the potential buyer said in English. We looked out at the desolate expanse around the village.

The transaction didn't take place, but Buigues did manage to find out the whereabouts of the Dolgan brigade. We piled back into the helicopter and took off, leaving the group to watch us depart. It would be approximately another week until they would see another helicopter.

The directions, it turned out, were wrong. We flew around for three hours before turning back and heading over the tundra and then over the forest back to Khatanga. That our expecta-

tions of finding the group were not fulfilled turned out to be nothing unusual. Indeed, the thwarting of expectations seems to have become the central metaphor for the whole expedition. That may not be such a bad thing. The world may have been tricked into believing Buigues had found an intact, possibly cloneable 23,000-year-old mammoth carcass in the permafrost — but those living on Taimyr are not complaining about the money and attention the find has brought them.

The soot-blackened helicopter back at the Khatanga airport. Two large auxiliary kerosene fuel drums take up most of the interior. Getting fuel to Khatanga is one of Buigues's ongoing problems and his largest expense.

Meanwhile, I had traveled north expecting to record stories of woe and desperation. Instead, I found — amid the tundra's stunning beauty and mind-boggling expanse — locals paradoxically set free by the elements one would have expected to weigh heavily. Unlike attitudes in most other parts of Russia, they were friendly to visitors and one another, eager to exchange stories and vodka — a reaction in part, perhaps, to the bitter cold that makes cooperation necessary.

The Route to Khatanga

Getting to Khatanga is less a matter of finding an elusive schedule of connecting flights and wrangling tickets than sheer luck. From Moscow, the route passes through Norilsk, the world's coldest city. With a population of 200,000 people about 300 kilometers above the Arctic Circle, it is also home to mighty Norilsk Nickel, the world's second-largest producer of the metal. On the night I was to travel, the flight from Moscow had been canceled. The carrier, Vnukovo Airlines, announced that there would not be enough jet fuel in Norilsk for its plane to make it back to Moscow. The most intrepid travelers, or those simply desperate to make it to Norilsk, paid for new tickets on another airline — on top of a $100 bribe — to get on a flight several hours later.

The new airline (which, apparently, *did* feel it could scrounge enough fuel to get back to Moscow) was Kras Air, after the Krasnoyarsk Region in which Norilsk is located. While the decrepit, rank-smelling, rattling Ilyushin plane jockeyed for take-off, passengers listened to piped-in music featuring two songs, one called "Kras Air," the other "The Krasnoyarsk Region." Both sound about the same, sung by about ten members of the Red Army choir. "Krasnoyarsk! Krasnoyarsk!" they croon, "Soon it will be a great power!"

Four time zones east, it's clear the only thing great about the ancient-looking Norilsk airport — with its cracking, dirty marble and splintered wood veneer — is a marathon of long waits: first, in the overheated plane, then, longer, in freezing temperatures outside. Once finally inside, passengers must squeeze through a tiny turnstile that makes getting through with any kind of substantial carry-on luggage (frequent in Russia) a feat involving the breaking of several laws of physics.

Of course, the flight on a puddle-jumping, twin-engined Antonov 24 to Khatanga is canceled. But this time it's due to bad weather. Indeed, the Norilsk airport is closed 100 days of the year for that reason. When the structure was built in the late 1970s, a Soviet general apparently commanded that the runway be built only into the direction from which the wind blows most frequently, thereby dooming passengers to tens of man-hours of delays.

I was traveling with a U.S. Discovery Channel crew of TV producers, several Russian and U.S. scientists and two other correspondents who had spent almost a year negotiating with the Discovery Channel to be able to come to Khatanga to write about "the mammoth." I had joined at the last minute, grabbing a chance to travel with one of the correspondents, Adam Goodheart, an old friend of mine. (Goodheart was writing an article for *Outside* magazine. The other journalist, Richard Stone, writes for *Science* magazine and is compiling a book on mammoths.) Through a series of half-purposeful misunderstandings between me, the Discovery Channel crew, their PR flunky ("the goof" as we came to call him) and Buigues's fixers in Moscow, I was able to sneak along on the trip. It was one of the few ways to enter Khatanga, a semi-closed village that requires an invitation from the "chief administrator" for a visit. That I

got, thanks to the Discovery Channel, whose producers had resigned themselves to my presence by the time we got to Norilsk. Chief among the protesters was the highest-ranking member of the crew, an executive producer with no knowledge of Russia, less about mammoths, and seemingly none about shooting documentaries. He soon became known by our tiny press corps as "the goon."

Since our motley crew of travelers was stuck in the airport for hours, a trip into town beckoned. Adam, Richard and I were the only ones who wanted to see Norilsk, so we set off alone. The airport is a 40-minute car ride from the city, built there because the ground above the permafrost thaws in summer and shifts, making construction exceedingly difficult and good sites hard to find. All Norilsk structures are built on piles driven into the permafrost, since foundations would melt the ground on which they stand.

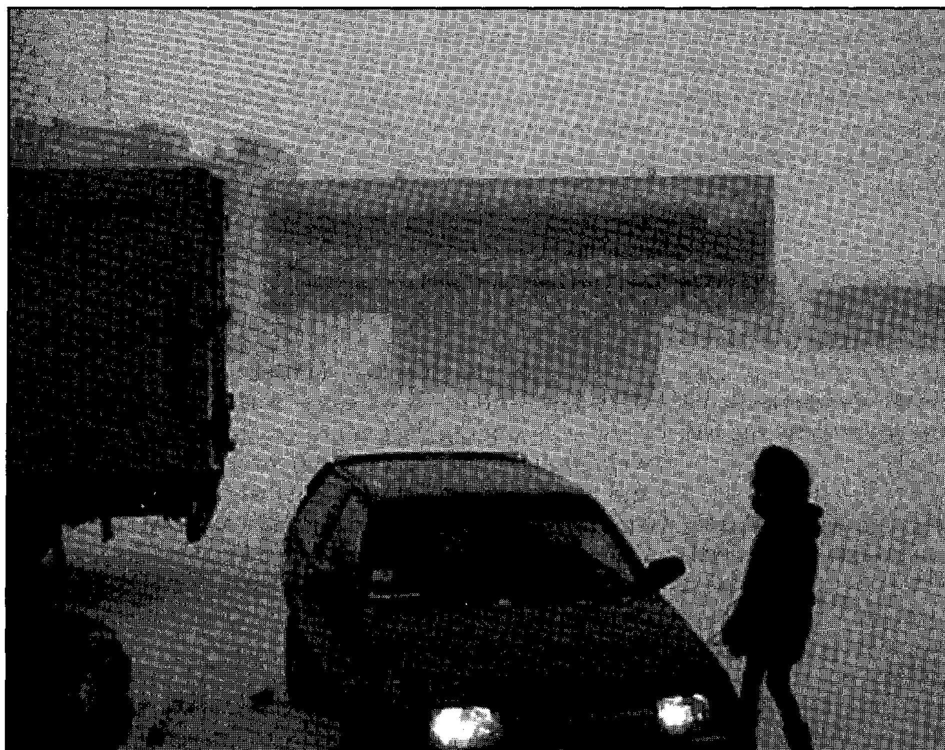
Outside the airport, it becomes immediately clear that it's quite a feat that an airport exists at all. The landscape is a barren sea of white, with snow whipped into dips and knolls. The bumpy, cracked road is barely visible and often disappears from sight under swirling snow. But the hazy sky is beautiful, and the sun, when it emerges, is surrounded by a halo of light. The sheer desolation and cold (minus 20 Celsius, and it's only October) is stunning and seemingly infinite.

The first structures to emerge from the vast barren stretches of frozen white are apartment buildings, concrete slabs reproduced all over the Soviet Union — with the exception that these are on piles, of course, and they're painted in pastel colors: pink, yellow, green, blue, as if to serve as antidotes to nature's overwhelming white. The effect is the opposite — the colors look sickly and absurd. There also seems to have been absolutely no effort made at architectural adaptation to accommodate for weather conditions.

Farther on, we see the first Norilsk Nickel factories. These are linked to the airport by the world's northernmost railroad — everything up here seems to qualify as a superlative. The tracks are apparently a terror to maintain on the unstable ground. The factory's buildings are predictably grey, grim and inefficient-looking. Warehouses linked by conveyor belts and shops with smokestacks belching black smoke scar the landscape.

The Siberian plant produces 90 percent of the country's nickel and cadmium, a majority of its copper and all of its platinum. It is the world's second-largest producer of nickel and the largest producer of platinum-group metals. It is also the driving force behind Norilsk, a city decreed into existence by Stalin because he felt Northern Siberia needed a large city.

Norilsk Nickel was involved in a major scandal in 1997, when Former Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Potanin, one of the country's reviled businessmen known as "oligarchs," paid $170 million through his Uneximbank for 38 percent of Norilsk Nickel after winning a privatization auction. Critics point to the fact that Mezhdunarodnaya Finansovaya Kompaniya, an Uneximbank affiliate, organized the sale. During the bidding, it shut out another Russian bank, Rosiisky Kredit, which bid $355 million — double Uneximbank's offer.



A windstorm picks up outside the Norilsk airport, making visibility difficult just about the time the Khatanga flight was due to leave. We wait for the storm to abate, but it seems that when we finally take off on a twin-engine prop plane, the wind is blowing as hard as ever.

When President Vladimir Putin began his crackdown against the oligarchs last summer, the Prosecutor General's Office demanded Potanin pay the government an additional $140 million for "damage against the state" carried out by the crooked privatization deal. Potanin refused, and the request seems to have been forgotten. However, while Moscow may continue to hate him, locals don't seem to be able to work up strong feelings about Potanin.

"Everyone really likes Potanin," said Andrei Sorokin, 32, an employee of one of the area's many nature reserves. We met him in Norilsk. "Potanin's a good man," he added.

Others were less effusive.

Downtown Khatanga as seen from a helicopter. The building in the center of the photograph, with a satellite dish above it, is the village's hotel, steps away from the airfield.

"No one really cares about him one way or the other," said Pyotr Grishin, 35, a geologist.

Norilsk residents have reason to give Potanin the benefit of the doubt. He may have stolen the city's bread and butter from the state, but productivity increased by four percent in the two years after the infamous auction, compared to a drop of four percent in the nonferrous metals sector as a whole. By January 1998, Norilsk Nickel's new management had paid off all wage arrears to workers. Average pay in the city is now around 800 dollars a month, way above the country's average.

We drive on. After we pass more industrial and residential grimness, often standing side-by-side, Norilsk itself appears out of the frozen earth. Its symmetrical layout has two basic architectural styles: concrete-slab and Stalinist-neoclassical. Apart from the piles underneath the buildings, nothing in the architecture gives away the fact that this is an Arctic city.

The cab drops us off. As we step out, we recoil from the wind. Even the locals hurry from destination to destination, their footsteps crunching on the snow as they clutch hats and scarves, heads down. One wouldn't last very long outside without shelter, and these people show it. The city's main street, Leninsky, leads to the austere offices of... yes, Norilsk Nickel, still adorned with Soviet-era insignia above the main doors. We set our shoulders into the wind and head off toward the hallowed corporate headquarters. However, our quest to see the city very quickly turns into a mad rush to find a café or restaurant in which to take shelter. The few of these we find seem to be closed. Desperate, we walk into an old Stalin-era department store, now consisting of a number of separate kiosks selling many of the same toiletries and junk food one sees on Moscow streets. Miraculously, we find a stall selling cabbage pies and tea and sit down at a greasy table, thankful to be inside, feeling a little stranded.

Striking up a conversation with three men at a nearby table, we find that Norilsk natives like to think of their city as a young one. A number of its residents were sent here under the Soviet regime to work as geologists, engineers and laborers. "Now a large percent of young people are drug addicts," said the nature reserve's Sorokin. "They walk around like Martians. What do you expect? There's little to do up here and it gets depressing."

The geologist Grishin — himself sent to Norilsk in the 1980s and who plans to leave "for the mainland" next year — is nonetheless more optimistic. "People live well enough and there are few problems with heating and electricity and things like that," he said. "The only time things got ugly was in the mid 1980s and early 1990s, when the nickel company laid off a lot of workers. People get unhappy when they can't leave for vacation. It's bad for children to be here all the time, not seeing anything else."

But things have improved, thanks in large part to the turnaround at Norilsk Nickel. Grishin attributes the change to another factor as well. "People began to do their own thing, to go into business and so on," he said. "They could do that because there's very little mafia here," he added. "It's too far away and too cold and expensive to penetrate

affairs here. So we only have to deal with corrupt officials.

"The biggest problem in Russia is that people steal," Grishin added. "Things only work when people themselves work, and we're lucky that that can more-or-less happen here."

Back at the airport, we endure another several-hours-long wait. It seems that the two planes a week scheduled to fly to Khatanga never leave on time. Rather, flights take place only when weather permits and pilots actually want to fly. Meanwhile, the wind picks up, threatening to leave us stranded until the next "scheduled" flight several days later. Luckily, however, the stars line up and we are able, many hours late and through buffeting winds, to make the hour-and-a-half flight 600 kilometers northeast to Khatanga.

Bundled up for Arctic weather, my two fellow press corps members, Adam Goodheart (left) and Richard Stone (right), flank the Discovery Channel public-relations commissar assigned to oversee our activities.

Khatanga

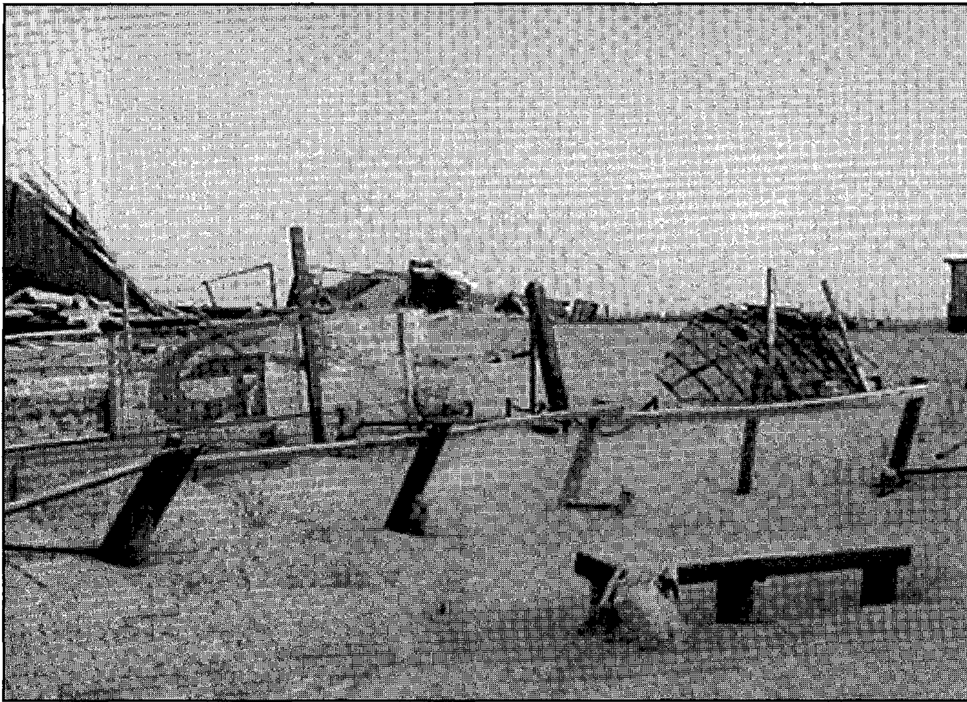
We arrive late at night. The airstrip, which serves as an auxiliary to the Norilsk airport, is a relatively large expanse next to the village. It's a very short walk to the settlement's hotel, a five-story, typically nondescript Soviet brick building. The television crew takes up one floor.

We then walk over to a restaurant, one of two in Khatanga. This one serves as a cafeteria for the "mammoth" crew of television people and scientists. It doesn't look promising — a one-story corrugated metal shack. Inside, however, the establishment resembles any self-respecting Soviet state restaurant, and is replete with a vinyl-covered bar, mirrored ceiling, a turning disco-ball, colored flashing lights, a stage and loud Russian pop music. The group of travelers is famished. What's on the menu? Besides the ubiquitous salted fish and mayonnaise-and-egg hors d'oeuvres, there's reindeer entrecote, reindeerburger with fried egg on top, reindeer croquettes... We ordered the reindeer entrecote — it's run out. And so began a week of reindeerburger with egg, punctuated occasionally by "mildly" salted fish.

Several members of Buigues's mammoth team of explorers and scientists were already in Khatanga and joined the group to fill us in on the project's latest developments. It's clear the Discovery Channel crew is beginning to increasingly resent Richard, Adam and me for horning in on their exclusive story. But we've already begun quaffing the surprisingly good beer on tap, and pretend to be oblivious. Then it's off to a deep sleep and an early rise to make it to the helicopter for the flight out to the tundra.

The following day, we have a chance to explore Kha-

A typical Khatanga building on the banks of the Khatanga River



Outside a barracks building, a stylized hammer-and-sickle mounted on a fence stands to the left of an old radar dish pointing face down in the snow. Money for such installations dried up after the Soviet collapse, leaving the military's infrastructure rotting.

tanga, a random assortment of corrugated barracks, two-story wooden apartment buildings, Soviet-style brick edifices and assorted one-story dwellings that look like a cross between wooden shacks and metal trailer houses. In the settlement's center stands a coal generator that spews black smoke into the pristine Arctic air. The snow on most of Khatanga's territory is coated in soot, and the lungs of the uninitiated must become accustomed to the toxic air.

Everything looks improvised — built as quickly as possible in the short summer months in time for winter. All structures are built above ground, of course. Buildings are connected by large steam pipes encased in wooden housing that also serves as walkways. Streets are named (Sovetskaya Street, Leninskaya Street and so on), but locals pick their own paths over heating pipes and through backyards.

Khatanga shelters around 4,000 residents, whose ranks are swelled in summer by visiting scientists and those looking for work. But the village seems much smaller. We're immediately struck most of all by the locals' friendly nature. No one glares or stares. Many want to talk. Dolgan school children wave and shout "Hello!" to passing foreigners on the street. Far from the depressed atmosphere I was expecting, I find one of optimism and welcome. It's quite a surprise.

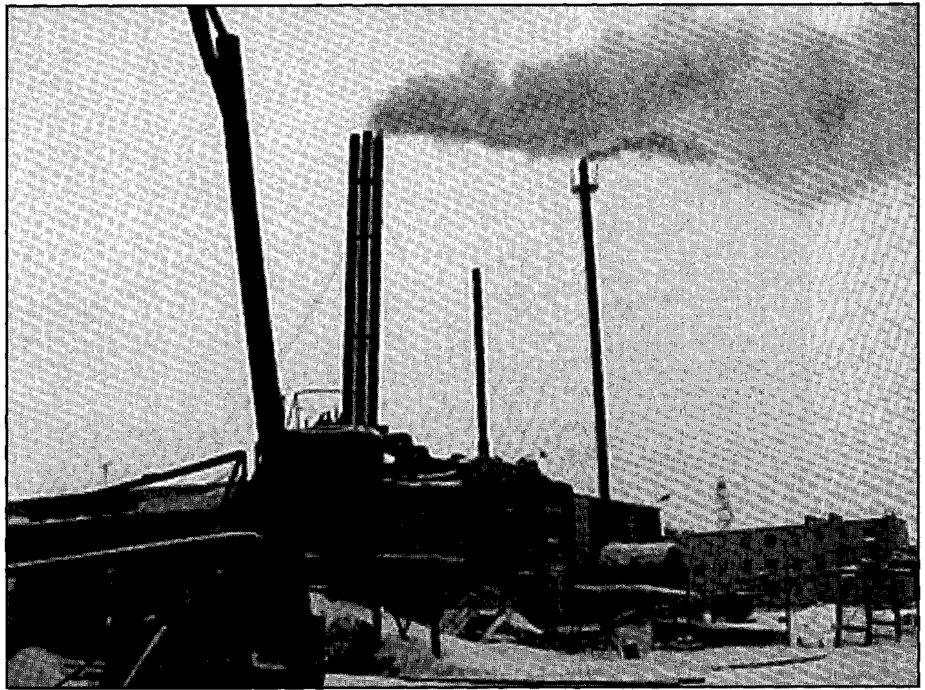
To the southwest of the village lies a stretch of industrial wreckage: abandoned barracks and military equipment, fast falling victim to the elements. It belonged to the army guarding the state's northern frontier. But the military ranks have drastically thinned since the Soviet Union's demise. The few remaining barracks are guarded by a soldier dressed in a thick sheepskin coat and toting an AK-47 automatic rifle.

A sign proclaiming "Discipline Is the Army's Most Important Quality. – V.I Lenin" hangs over one abandoned barracks building, in front of which lies a crumbled radar scanner. Could the soldiers here ten years ago have imagined visitors from the enemy state would soon be rummaging around their rusting, once-secret infrastructure?

A little further west, eerie and total silence surrounds us. The seemingly endless emptiness is broken only by the rumbling of an occasional truck or snowmobile, sometimes

The sun setting over the Khatanga River. The warm, deep colors of the sun and sky somehow made Taimyr seem even colder. At night, the Aurora Borealis is visible during much of the year.

with trailer attached, carrying a group of bundled-up Khatangans. To the east stand mostly residential houses, a school and a five-story hospital. In the afternoons, the shouts of children playing in the snow resound here.

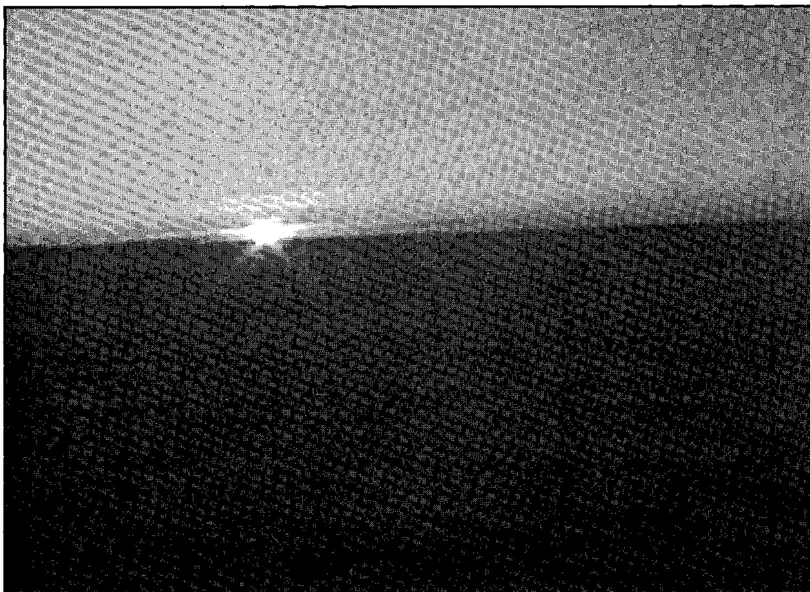


The coal-burning heating plant in the center of Khatanga. In the middle of an otherwise pristine setting, its fumes poison the air and stain the snow black with soot.

Most Khatanga residents are white — chiefly of Russian and Ukrainian origin. Indeed, Cossacks from the Ukraine founded the village in 1674. They were taking part in Muscovy's expansion east to tap Siberia's natural resources — mostly fur. These newcomers, who mingled with Yakuts to the east, helped create the first Dolgan tribes.

The village's current appearance is largely a result of the 1970s, when Moscow sent geologists and other explorers to the area to look for oil and diamonds. Today, residents of Taimyr contrast highly with those of other Northern Siberian areas, such as Chukotka to the east, from which around 80 percent of inhabitants have left since the Soviet collapse. Those living in Khatanga depend on airplanes during 10 months of the year as the only way to bring anything into the settlement. Planes carrying goods and produce arrive once every two weeks. The village also depends on coal and diesel fuel for its electricity and heat. It's hard enough in summer to navigate boats through the Laptev Sea, around the Taimyr Peninsula and down the Khatanga River. However, sometimes supplies don't make it before the waterway begins to freeze. When the weather begins to cool at the end of summer, 20-centimeter-thick ice forms within three days. That happened in 1998, when fuel had to be continually brought in by plane.

"We were afraid, very afraid," said Lena Sokolova, 39, a cashier working in one of Khatanga's 16 shops — tiny affairs, some actually just small kiosks. (Before Buigues's arrival, only one store existed. Prices are more than a third higher than they are in the rest of Russia.) Despite the uncertainties and hardships, however, Sokolova, who came to Taimyr 10 years ago to work as a factory technician, says she does not want to leave Khatanga. "I went on holiday last year and spent the whole time counting the days until my return," she said. "This is my home on the corner of the earth."



Sheer emptiness surrounds Khatanga

The friendliness I found in Khatanga even extended into the local administration building. In most areas of provincial Russia, local governing bodies head a Byzantine bureaucracy hostile to prying eyes. When I walked into the reception room of Nikolai Fokin, the dour chief administrator of the Taimyr Peninsula, his secretary welcomed me and promised me she'd convince her boss to talk to me.

The peninsula is part of the Taimyr Region, also known as the Dolgano-Nenetsk Autonomous District. While Taimyr is one of Russia's 89 regions and autonomous districts, it is nonetheless also considered part of the Krasnoyarsk Region. In late October,

The administration building stands to the right of a residential block with a sign exhorting Khatangans to "Preserve Peace."

Norilsk Nickel director Alexander Khloponin declared his candidacy for governor of Taimyr, where the company provides 80 percent of tax revenues. Although Norilsk, where most operations are based, is not technically part of Taimyr, NGK, a Norilsk Nickel subsidiary, has interests in Taimyr, where it pays royalties on use of deposits. NGK also owns the port at Dudinka, the capital of Taimyr, from which it ships its metals.

Russian newspapers suggested that Norilsk Nickel wanted to rid itself of its obligations to the Krasnoyarsk territory, where, according to Komrakov, it accounts for almost 60 percent of the territorial budget. However, analysts say removing Norilsk from Krasnoyarsk's jurisdiction and delivering it to Taimyr instead would be a complex procedure, requiring the agreement of both regions.

Taimyr Peninsula administrator Fokin did agree to see me, and brushed the area's 1998 fuel threat aside. "We flew in supplies all winter," he said in his spacious, newly renovated office. "The heat and electricity stayed on and no schools closed."

Fokin arrived in Khatanga in 1969 to work as a welder. He set about moving his way up the Communist Party hierarchy, and was made head of the local Party Committee in 1990. It was he who convinced Buigues to look for mammoth remains. "Bernard attracts people here, and that's very good," he said, adding that the administration has plans of its own. "We want to build houses on the tundra for people to visit."

As I left Fokin's office, I heard his secretary scrambling to get chairs for the chief administrator's reception room — they had all been taken to the restaurant for that evening's celebration of an administration employee's wedding. But she caught sight of me and stopped me from leaving.

"Just one minute," she said. "We have to capitalize on our good fortune." (Meaning, I gathered, my visit.) A door opened down a short hallway and a middle-aged woman approached with a man carrying a VHS camera following. It was the local television crew, who produce programs broadcast when the station sends its signal over the tundra for half-an-hour twice a week. (Otherwise, only two state-owned national television stations broadcast in Taimyr through Khatanga for those lucky enough to have access to a television screen.)

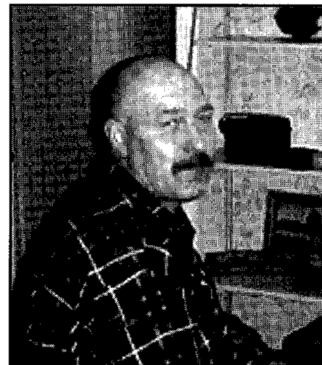
One interview later — "What brought you to Khatanga?" ("The mammoth.") "What have you been doing here ("Eating reindeer.") — I was allowed to leave. I missed the broadcast the next day — while eating reindeer (entrecote, this time) for dinner.

Siberian Freedom

Siberia usually brings to mind political exiles and Gulag prison camps. Taimyr, which remains completely dark two months of the year, is no exception. A number of camps were built around Khatanga under Stalin. "With no barbed wire," said one local. "That's not necessary up here."

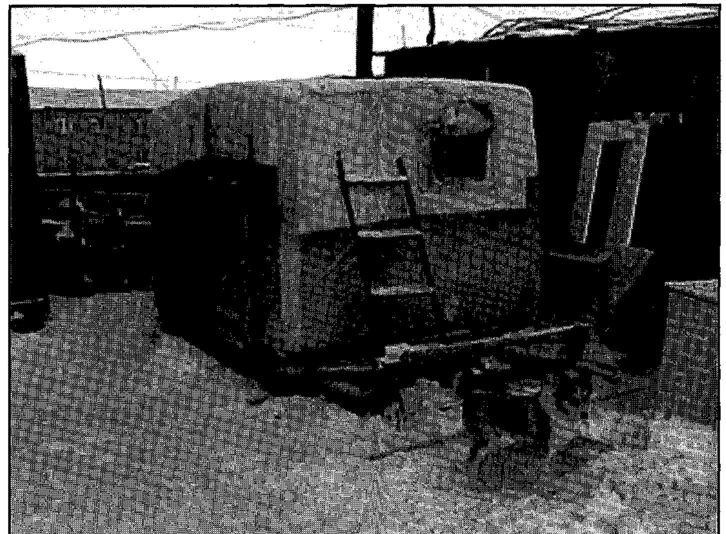
So it came as a bit of a surprise to listen to Boris Lebedev, a hunter and fisher who has worked for Buigues for the past several years. We talked over reindeerburger (with egg) in the restaurant. Lebedev traveled to Taimyr 25 years ago from the town of Ivanovo, near Moscow. "Only up here in

Nikolai Fokin, Khatanga's chief administrator, who spent decades in the local Communist Party apparatus before being democratically elected in 1996. It was Fokin who helped persuade Buigues to collect woolly mammoth remains.



Boris Lebedev in Buigues's house. "I came here to be free," he says.

(left) Konstantin Uksusnikov, dressed in reindeer fur, said life for most Dolgans deteriorated after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but admits things have improved over the last few years. A decline in the demand for fur is among the local population's chief problems. (below) A typical bolok, *in which Dolgans live when out on the tundra.*



the north could someone truly belong to himself," he said. "I came here to be free."

Lebedev attended a military academy in Ivanovo and held a series of odd jobs before traveling to the Khita River, 120 kilometers southwest of Khatanga. He took up a life trapping Arctic foxes, fishing and hunting reindeer. "My first view of Khatanga was a number of small, one-story wooden buildings — there were no brick buildings then — with plumes of smoke rising absolutely vertically because there was no wind," he said. "The elements unite people and make other things irrelevant. It's another world here." When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, he said he "didn't feel much difference."

Vladimir Eisner also traveled to Khatanga two decades ago to work as a meteorologist. "But the tundra called me in," he said. He also dropped his work to spend his time hunting and fishing.

Dolgans

Dolgans chiefly live on the tundra north of Khatanga and make up a very young group formed only around 400 years ago. The Dolgan language is Turkic and close to Yakut. (Yakutia is located in Northern Siberia east of Taimyr.)

Dolgans are typical nomads. On the tundra, they live in rectangular *"boloki."* These are built with wooden frames covered in cloth, reindeer hide and canvas and put on wooden runners to be dragged by reindeer. They were introduced by Russians several hundred years ago, before which Dolgans lived in teepee-like tents.

Although Dolgans are reindeer herders, forced settlement wiped out many of the domesticated reindeer that once belonged to their tribes. Taimyr is now estimated to have around 8,000 domestic reindeer in three settlements, whereas single owners once used to boast thousands of their own. That means fishing and hunting wild reindeer is crucial. The Taimyr Peninsula is home to around 1 million wild reindeer, which subsist chiefly on lichen found under the snow.

Taimyr is also known for its nature reserves. In 1979, the United States and Canada donated 30 musk oxen to Taimyr. The species had died out over 3,000 years before from overhunting. "Now there are 1,000 musk ox all over Taimyr," said Sergei Pankevich, deputy head of one of three nature reserve organizations on Taimyr.

"Ninety percent of men on Taimyr are hunters," the former meteorologist Eisner said. The hunters generally

Evdokia Aksyonova in Khatanga's nature reserve museum. She is standing next to a display of traditional Dolgan clothing.

ignore hunting limits, but that seems to bother no one. "Everyone knows who kills what, and no one really cares," Eisner said. "If I kill a reindeer and someone else doesn't, I give him some of mine."

Konstantin Uksusnikov, 66, a Dolgan born on the banks of the Popigay River north of Khatanga, has been a hunter and fisher all his life, like almost all of his fellow tribesmen. He said his collective farm, privatized since 1991, now boasts around 4,500 reindeer. He added that some private reindeer owners have up to 100 of their own animals.

"A Dolgan feels more comfortable on the tundra," Uksusnikov said in the stifling heat of Buigues' house, a sprawling one-floor shack that has undergone many additions. The Dolgan proudly displayed his own reindeer-fur coat, which he had left outside to avoid shedding. "The best furs come at the end of August, when the reindeer has grown his winter coat," he said. A coat of reindeer skin can last up to ten years. A set of more ornate clothes is used for special occasions, such as visiting neighboring brigades.

Another group of nomads also lives on Taimyr: around 2,000 members of the Ngonasani group, who speak their own Turkic language. They are also traditional reindeer hunters.

Despite their awesome ability to deal with the elements, local tribes predictably face daily problems. "Life is hard for the Dolgans, especially the older generations, which are nostalgic for the Soviet Union," said Evdokia Aksyonova, a middle-aged Dolgan woman who serves as director of the Taimyr nature reserve's one-room museum.

Uksusnikov is a good example. He served as a Komsomol Communist youth organization leader from 1958 to 1969. He remembers the Soviet regime fondly. "The Soviet authorities paid a lot of attention to us," he said. "Every settlement had a baker, for example. Now people have to bake bread themselves."

But tensions between Dolgans and others living on Taimyr can partially be attributed to Soviet attempts to force Dolgans to live a sedentary way of life. Under the Lenin and Stalin regimes, nomads were seen as a threat to the Soviet Union because they could not be tied to a physical spot for easier control. Nomads were also difficult to assimilate into the Party hierarchy, and coopting local elites into the administration was often used throughout the Soviet Union (and Tsarist Russia) to extend control and suppress regional separatism. Collectivization began in 1939. But locals say the Dolgans never completely settled down.

"To capture the Dolgan, you have to change his way of life," Lebedev said. "That's impossible."

Dolgans also resisted forced settlement. A shoddy monument topped with a Communist star standing in front of the local administration building commemorates Party members killed in 1932 by a rebelling Dolgan. "To Com-

munist Party members who died at the hands of class enemies," the monument's plaque reads.

Uksusnikov said Dolgans suffered most during the Second World War, when they were forced to contribute warm clothes and fur to the war effort. Three Dolgans were drafted to fight from his settlement of Sobachnaya. None returned. But Uksusnikov is quicker to cite beneficial developments initiated by Moscow. "Under Stalin, money was given to build villages," he said. "In the winter, children were left there to study in schools, which freed the men to travel the tundra and hunt. That was a big change for the better."

Eisner is more critical. "The Communists gave supplies to the Dolgans, but didn't show them what to do with them," he said. "Children were forced into schools where they forgot traditions and skills such as how to herd reindeer. "The Party ruined many traditions. People began to drink. Now they watch television. Marijuana has even appeared in the last several years. But on the tundra, you have to work to survive."

Dolgans now generally get along with Russians, Uksusnikov said, but added that Dolgans generally don't find Russian jokes funny, and find some offensive. (Many Russian jokes involve racial stereotyping.) He has recently been employed by Taimyr's ethnographic museum to collect Dolgan jokes, songs and anecdotes.

He tells one of his favorites, a riddle: "What do you call something with nine holes?" He can't suppress a big grin. "A person."

Changing Economy

Under the Soviet regime, residents of Taimyr benefited from state subsidies channeled north in part to maintain Khatanga's airport and function as a jumping-off point for geologists and others exploring the area.

The state also bought furs, reindeer meat and fish from Dolgan tribesmen. Moscow imposed quotas and some Stakhanovite hunters were even rewarded for turning in bumper hauls. Uksusnikov says his father was the first to do so. Hunting Arctic fox was also once a lucrative occupation. That changed with the Soviet collapse. Subsidies dried up while competition from fur farms in Russia and abroad has suppressed demand enough to make the work unprofitable on Taimyr.

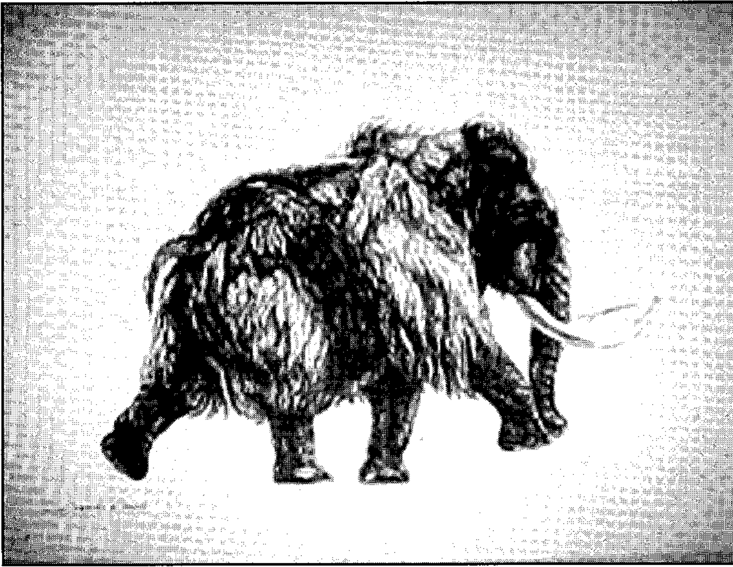
"All of a sudden, there was no one who would buy our furs," the nature reserve museum's Aksyonova said. "'How are we to live now without our subsidies?' a lot of people asked." Several thousand Khatanga residents and even Dolgans left Taimyr. Alcoholism, always widespread in Khatanga, grew as quality of life eroded. The pace was even quicker in tundra settlements. But life has begun to change. In the past 15 years, increasing numbers of Dolgans have begun to return to a nomadic way of life — for many, it's the best way to make a living on the tundra. Dolgan brigades make their way to Khatanga once of twice a year to sell reindeer and fish.

"You can sell your furs to anyone now, and that's good," Uksusnikov said. The chief complaint is that there are not enough middlemen willing to sell local goods elsewhere. Other gripes include the fact that tundra life does not provide enough comforts such as toilets and television.

Life in Khatanga has also recently and substantially benefited from Norilsk Nickel. The company has begun to help pay for schooling, clothing and food supplies. In return, the government allows the company to avoid paying a certain amount of federal tax. Norilsk Nickel is also erecting a number of brick buildings in the center of the village to serve as housing. In return, the company chiefly carries out geological work on Taimyr in search of platinoids, gold, emeralds and diamonds.

Buigues's presence has also made an impact, even if a mostly psychological one. "Bernard brought a fresh wind," Lebedev said. There have been material improvements as well. "We have two helicopters in Khatanga," Lebedev said. "One is always kept here for emergencies. But if more tour-

A pile of frozen fish in one of Khatanga's ice caves hacked out of the permafrost and used to store fish and reindeer meat. In summer, temperatures in the caves hover at around minus 14 degrees Celsius.



One theory has it that mammoths became extinct because of climate change. Another says humans hunted the hulking animals out of existence. A third postulates that disease wiped out the mammoths. Some scientists say a combination of factors is responsible.

ists come, we might get a third helicopter. That would be significant to the whole population."

The massive amounts of cash needed to pay for fuel and maintenance trickle down into the local economy. Natives also say the airfield's auxiliary status and the raw materials in the area mean the federal government will not turn its attention from Khatanga as it has so many other villages around Russia.

Meanwhile, everyone I interview — including Fokin, Eisner and Uksusnikov — overflows with praise for Buigues. "People are welcoming to foreigners here because of Bernard," Eisner said. "He remembers everyone by name and when he smiles, he smiles from the heart." (Buigues is almost always smiling.) "He also gives candy to the children and money to the locals. Not the men — they'd drink it away. He gives it to the women who buy slippers and other things for their children."

Mammoth Expedition

Scientists say most mammoths became extinct around 10,000 years ago, surviving on Siberia's Wrangel Island longer than anywhere else on earth. Radiocarbon dating indicates that a population of dwarf mammoths existed there until between 7,000 and 3,700 years ago. Some scientists say they died out when the climate became wetter and lush Siberian grass fields turned into swamps, leaving the herbivores without food.

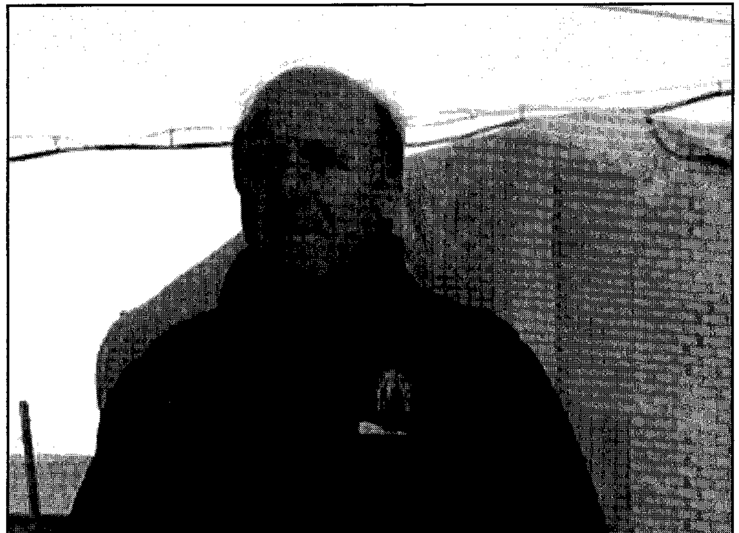
The word "mammoth" itself is also tied to Russia, and was first used by the mayor of Amsterdam in the 17th century. A paleontology enthusiast, he traveled to Russia in 1692 on invitation from Peter the Great to appraise recently found mammoth bones in Siberia. The mayor adapted a word used by local tribes.

But it wasn't mammoth booty that attracted Buigues, who first came to Khatanga in the early 1990s to set up a base for his Cerpolex company, which organizes trips to the North Pole for wealthy enthusiasts. Cheaper than Canada and with plenty of local labor to help with expedition logistics, Khatanga has become a popular jumping-off point to the North Pole.

Buigues, born in Morocco before moving to France with his parents, ran away from home as a teenager. He had wanted to become a painter, but rebelled when his parents refused to allow him to study art. Instead, he worked in a plywood factory while entertaining plans to foment leftist uprisings. That ended when he took part in an expedition to Greenland and later to the South Pole.

After coming to Khatanga, Buigues says he paid no attention to the mammoth remains constantly found on the tundra. Bones are usually unearthed in summer, when the top layer of ground thaws and shifts, exposing the remains chiefly around riverbeds.

Selling mammoth ivory has long been a large trade. It was bought intensively in the 18th century by traders from Russia and Europe. Scientists estimate that around 50,000 tusks have been removed from Taimyr over the past 200 years alone. However, details about the current trade seem to be a closely held secret. Uksusnikov said locals give mammoth ivory to sailors in return for tea and tobacco, but



Bernard Buigues came to Khatanga early last decade to set up a base for leading expeditions to the North Pole. The local administration helped convince him to look for woolly-mammoth remains in 1998, after which he found the Discovery Channel as a sponsor. "I often questioned what I was doing," he said of his first attempts to unearth the so-called Jarkov mammoth.

The St. Petersburg Zoological Institute's Alexei Tikhonov, one of the most respected scientists studying mammoths, was an early and loud skeptic about Buigues's claims to have found an intact mammoth carcass. But he says any publicity for the project is good, helping attract funds that filter down to the local population.

would say no more. No one else answered my repeated questions about where ivory is sold these days, but rumor has it that St. Petersburg and Moscow mafia groups travel to Taimyr in April to buy mammoth ivory, which is not banned like elephant ivory.

"Selling mammoth tusks on the black market is a big problem," said Dick Mol, a Dutch amateur paleontology enthusiast who has built his own collection of over 1,500 bones in Amsterdam. A customs agent, Mol has become an important part of the mammoth team. "Thirty-three tons were shipped in 14 months through the Amsterdam airport alone," he said. "Much of it is cut in pieces and mixed with elephant ivory from Africa, so it's difficult to sort out."

It was only after being persuaded by local bureaucrats that Buigues became interested in mammoth remains himself. "After returning to Paris from Khatanga one time, I began to investigate and saw there had only been a few [whole] mammoth discoveries." It was then than Buigues gave a piece of mammoth ivory from Khatanga to a biologist friend, who dated it. "He found out it was more than 10,000 years old. That attracted me," Buigues said.

These days, Buigues employs Dolgans during summer to fan out looking for mammoth remains. In addition to ivory, Buigues began paying around $2 per kilo of mammoth bone, which had previously been completely ignored. "The bones had no value before," said the nature reserve's Pankevich. "When Bernard asked people to collect them for him, they buried him with bones." Buigues has even lately become worried that mafia groups are concerned he is getting the best of the yearly take. "Bernard pays the same amount as others for the bones, but he's always giving out supplies and food — to the chagrin of the Discovery Channel people whose money it is — so the Dolgans prefer him," Eisner said.

In 1998, members of the Jarkov family, Dolgans living on the tundra, came to Buigues. The previous year, they had come across giant mammoth tusks while herding reindeer near the Bolshaya-Balakhnya River. Buigues became convinced a whole mammoth lay under the ice. He began digging out the Jarkov mammoth in May 1998, with Lebedev's help.

"There was no money at first," Buigues said. "I often questioned what I was doing, and when I began to find hair and tissue, I became depressed because I knew I wasn't using the right technology and didn't know what to do."

His first tool was a hairdryer — until he made up his mind to chop a 23-ton block out of the ice, put it on a metal frame, and fly it by helicopter 240 kilometers south to Khatanga for slow defrosting. It made headlines all over the world. In a last-minute publicity stunt, Buigues had the Jarkov tusks attached to the front of the ice block to create

A collection of tusks found on the Taimyr Peninsula. Until Buigues's appearance, mammoth ivory was the only valued part of the skeleton. Buigues now stores the tusks in a secret location to avoid tempting thieves.

the impression of a whole mammoth inside. It was an indelible image.

"I think Bernard became drugged with mammoths," said Alexei Tikhonov, the chief Russian scientist on the project. Tikhonov, based at the St. Petersburg Zoological Institute, is scientific secretary of the mammoth committee of Moscow's prestigious Russian Academy of Sciences. "Bernard began to like the idea and exerted huge efforts to find sponsors. Eventually, he found the Discovery Channel." Buigues also brought in young specialists, to the chagrin of most in the Russian establishment who resent being left out of the project. In all, around 20 scientists are working on the Jarkov mammoth project.

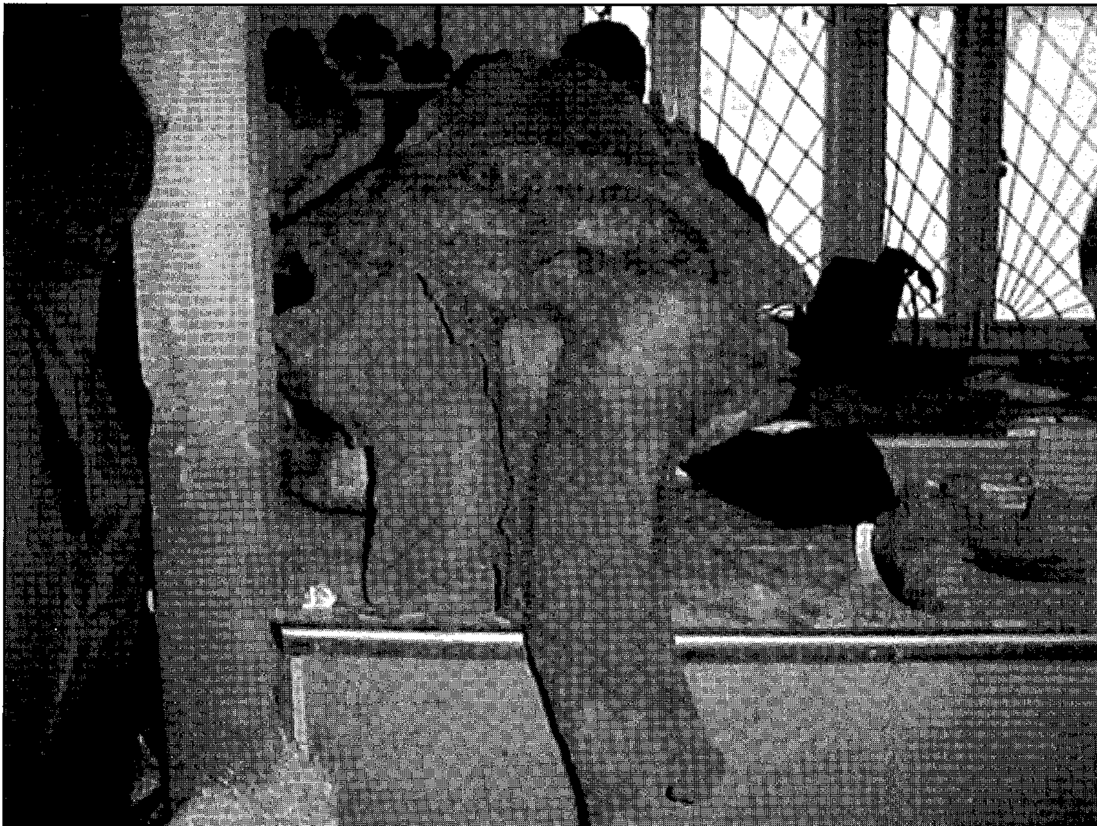
A large part of the scientific work now going on involves figuring out exactly what caused the extinction. Ross MacPhee — head of the department of mammalogy at New York's American Museum of Natural History, and who was part of the group with which I traveled to Khatanga — is a specialist in extinction. He attributes the mammoths' demise to a major disease called a hypervirus. While it is often thought mammoths died out from human hunting, MacPhee said the fact that the latest dating of a mammoth bone is 10,000 B.C. means that perhaps there was no interaction between man and mammoth on the Taimyr Peninsula.

However, not all agree. A number of those involved in the project say the mammoths were killed off because of a combination of factors, including climate and hunting.

Dolgan Legends

Before Buigues's arrival, many Dolgans believed mammoth bones to be the remains of large moles called "helli" that would burrow under ground but die instantly if they accidentally saw the light of day. Others thought the many depressions in Taimyr's forest and tundra resulted from the impressions of mammoth bodies made while they were sleeping. Rivers were carved out of the ground by mammoth tails dragging behind them as they walked. Various forms of mammoth were not the only legendary animals to occupy the tundra. Uksusnikov told me about the "chichuna," a snowman whom several Dolgans claim to have seen. Uksusnikov said it is imperative not to touch the blood of a chichuna, which is enough to turn a human into the hairy white snowman.

Some legends have had an impact on Buigues' excavations. Older generations of Dolgans still say digging anything out of the earth constitutes a sin against Au Daidu, deity of the earth. Mammoth bones must never be dug up; they can only be taken if they are washed up by a riverside, for example. If something must be removed from the ground, a substitute must be put in place. When the Jarkov mammoth was lifted out of the ground, Dolgan elders sacrificed a rare white reindeer to throw into the hole in the



A mammoth skull in the expedition's "bone bank." The preserved remains are weathered and cracked, resembling wood. But they are heavy as stone.

The American Natural History Museum's Ross MacPhee (left) and Dick Mol drilling mammoth bones for radiocarbon dating in a U.S. laboratory. "It's very important to find out when and how these species became extinct," Mol said.

ice. Shortly after Buigues flew the Jarkov mammoth to Khatanga, a number of Dolgans died in Novorybnoye — the settlement we visited by helicopter our first day. Eisner said the deaths were caused by tuberculosis and a knife fight, but the tribesmen attributed them to the excavation.

Dolgans also refuse to plant trees for fear of harming Au Daidu. In addition to the god of the earth, there also exists Khalan Tayon, god of the sky and the ascendant Dolgan deity. There is also Ote Ghe, god of fire.

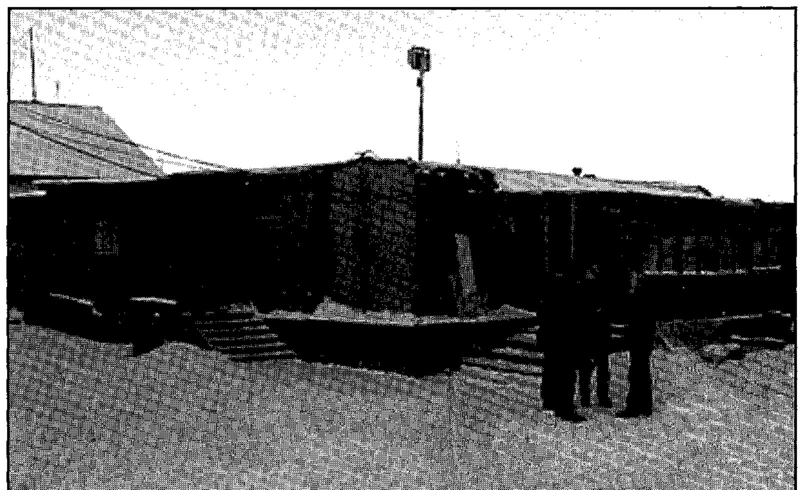
Discovery Channel Hype

The Discovery Channel first announced it would help fund Buigues's expedition and film the project in May 1999. That summer, the channel flew a crew out on an expedition into the tundra in search of mammoth remains. While the channel's involvement has meant the project has been able to proceed — and that Khatanga would benefit in part from the cash — it has also led to a great amount of misinformation about the mammoth. Initial press reports about the mammoth said there was an "intact mammoth carcass." That has been disproved, but more than a year later, the Discovery Channel is still pushing that kind of hype. Its documentary series title, "Raising the Mammoth," leads potential viewers to believe the ice block contains a whole carcass. That illusion is reinforced on the channel's website (http://izzy.online.discovery.com/exp/mammoth/mammoth.html).

The website's main page reads: "The mammoth hunters have returned to Siberia for the third phase of the ongoing expedition. The goal this time: defrost the 20,000-year-old animal!" Another page says: "Join an expedition at one of the most remote and hostile locations on Earth as they attempt to extract a 23,000-year-old woolly mammoth from its icy grave in the Siberian tundra. Raising the Mammoth takes you into the middle of this bold venture to retrieve the long-frozen creature, led by French explorer Bernard Buigues, and reveals what scientists hope to learn about this ancient beast that still walked the Earth when Egyptian rulers were building the pyramids."

Part of the hype surrounding the Jarkov mammoth has also involved the possibility of cloning. An Associated Press reporter, echoing tens of other correspondents, wrote the following last year: "Five days after airlifting the frozen hulk of the world's first intact mammoth carcass to the Siberian town of Khatanga, the team of paleontologists said today their find could lead to a breakthrough in cloning an animal that has been extinct for 10,000 years."

"That's nonsense," Tikhonov told me. "Elementary knowledge of physics rules that out." For cloning to work, Tikhonov said, it is necessary to find an intact cell containing a whole segment of DNA. Since water makes up around



Buigues's house, next to the hotel, functions as the center of mammoth operations. It is home to a steady stream of Cerpolex employees who come and go all day.

80 percent of cells, frozen cells necessarily expand and rupture. "It's impossible to find an intact cell in a block that has been frozen over 1,000 years."

The closest that can be hypothetically achieved is a type of genetic engineering project involving combining elephant and mammoth genes. Gestation could theoretically take place in an Indian elephant. Six laboratories are currently working on a so-called trans-gene project; among them is the American Natural History Museum.

At the same time, a group of Japanese scientists is attempting to find mammoth sperm to clone. Tikhonov also dismisses that project. "You're not going to find a mammoth with its genitals intact. That's impossible."

The Real Mammoth

Tikhonov, who met Buigues in 1998, was one of the first and most vocal mammoth skeptics when the news first broke last fall. During a news conference in Moscow last year, he sat next to a disappointed Buigues while voicing his reservations. When the German magazine *der Spiegel* wrote a sarcastic exposé of the mammoth project last year, it relied on Tikhonov's statements to make its point.

"Everyone was quoting Russian television, which was saying a whole mammoth had been discovered," Tikhonov told me. "But I gave an interview to NTV [a Russian television channel] and Reuters, denying it. It's okay for journalists to say things like that, but not for scientists. I agreed there were some bones and fur in the block, but not a whole mammoth."

It was later that year that correspondents from *der Spiegel* traveled to Khatanga and "wrote things Bernard didn't like," Tikhonov said. Tikhonov said he thinks claims about a whole mammoth hurt the credibility of those working on the project. "The work is important and serious," he said. And that importance is not necessarily only in the benefit to science. "The project brings money to Khatanga, and that's very good."

The Discovery Channel has so far spent around $2 million on the project, chiefly to the local helicopter operator. The project also brings foreign explorers, scientists and journalists who eat in the local restaurant, live in the hotel, spend money in local shops and dole out dollars for mammoth ivory carvings. Tikhonov also lauds Buigues's North Pole expeditions for giving work to locals in April, when an ice runway is built on the tundra to fly in supplies. "No other place in Northern Siberia gets as much money and tourism," Tikhonov said. "And that's thanks only to Bernard."

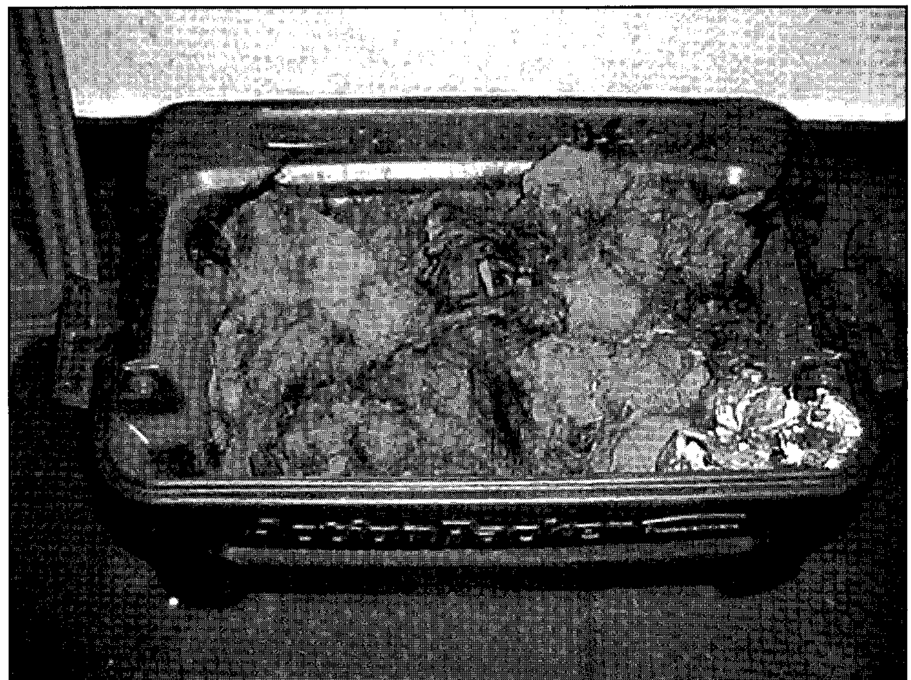
Buigues also plans to chop an underground ice museum from the permafrost to house his finds. For now, a number of mammoth, musk ox, ancient-horse and wolf bones are housed in a former bank, one of a number of one-story wooden buildings near the hotel. Here, various types of remains lie together on shelves while MacPhee and Mol drill into various finds from last summer to take samples to send to a laboratory in Florida for radiocarbon dating.

The mammoth bones are caked in mud. They're dark and cracked, and look very much like dry and weathered wood. But they're heavy as rock. Tusks weigh up to 50 to 60 kilograms. Almost all the skulls are also cracked because Dolgans interested only in the tusks broke them to pry out the ivory.

One of the more interesting specimens in the bone bank collection is a wolf skull. "It has some dog-like signs that are not true of the wolf population," Tikhonov said. "That means it could have been one of the first dogs. Man is first dated on the Taimyr Peninsula 6,000 years ago. If the date of the skull is earlier, then we can say people were also here earlier."

The Ice Cave

During my entire stay in Khatanga, the Discovery Channel crew did its best to keep me at arms length —



A cooler containing clumps of mammoth hair and dirt to which it is attached. The hair is thick and coarse and smells somewhat like wet dog.

The holy grail: the "mammoth" itself inside the ice cave. The impressive tusks were attached as an afterthought to an ice block containing scattered bones, fur and tissue — but certainly not a whole mammoth.

except during what was scheduled to be the climax of the trip (and, apparently, of the pending installment of the channel's "Raising the Mammoth" series). At around midnight on the fourth night, the PR flunky interrupted a card game by banging on our hotel door.

"Guys, guys!" he said breathlessly. "They're going to be filming in the cave. And you're gonna be there!"

The ice cave, on the village's north side on the banks of the Khatanga River, was hacked out of the permafrost around 15 years ago to serve as a year-round storage facility for reindeer meat and fish. It was there that Buigues's team had brought the mammoth block last year after its helicopter trip to Khatanga.

This was it! We were finally going to see the holiest of holies: the mammoth itself.

The cave's entrance is through a metal garage-type door. Inside, we were instantly hit by the pungent smell of reindeer carcass. The air felt cold and wet. My glasses instantly fogged up. Skinned reindeer bodies lay piled on metal carts along a railroad track leading into to the cave. The walls arched about fifteen feet over our heads. A row of electric lightbulbs hung from the top of the dirt-colored permafrost, itself covered with a layer of white ice crystals. Ice corridors led to the left and right. We turned right, past piles of fish (ryapushka, a smelly, medium-sized salmon cousin caught in the Khatanga River) on the smooth ice-rink of a floor. The mammoth was lodged in a small alcove. Blocks of clear ice cut from the river served as translucent walls separating the area from more piles of fish and reindeer beyond.

The "mammoth" itself is simply a square block of ice. But the belatedly attached tusks give it life, briefly silencing even the most cynical of the visitors — me. They curve outward and upward and cast a spell by promising more inside. A wooden platform surrounds the ice block. Square chunks have been cut out of the top of the block, and bits of fur and bone are visible. Among other tools lying on the block, a wooden box holds a row of gleaming chrome hairdryers used for defrosting.

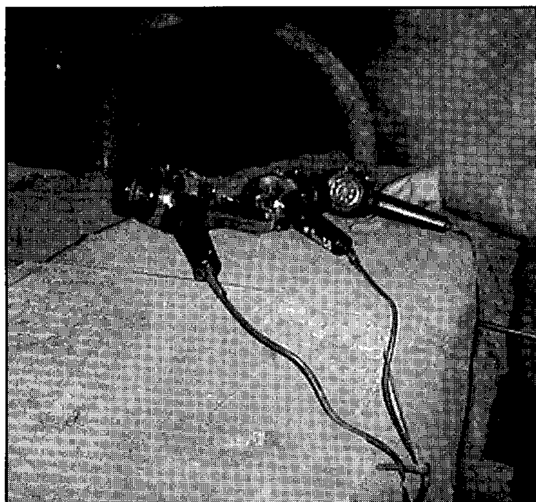
The mammoth is set to be fully melted by the end of next year. But whether that will actually happen depends on a number of factors, including Buigues's enthusiasm and further Discovery Channel funding. Although Buigues has signed a five-year contract with the channel, some of the

scientists had begun to suspect it will be dropped.

To me, the wooden platform around the ice block resembled less a stand used by paleontologists than a theatrical stage. A Discovery Channel crew was working fast to set up lighting. The mammoth had already taken center stage, with its promise frozen inside, hidden from the eyes of millions of potential Discovery Channel viewers hooked by the prospect of seeing a mammoth carcass. The various supporting actors had yet to arrive. The camera crew waited.

"Bernard works according to his own schedule," a Discovery Channel director told the press gang-of-three. "That's not always great for us, but it's what makes him interesting. You have to work *with* people who have charisma like that." Indeed, it seems most of Khatanga revolves around Buigues, who in turn becomes enlivened by the attention directed toward him. He makes many promises, mostly concerning his own time, which cannot be kept. Today is no exception. He said he would be in the cave by midnight, but at 12:30, he has yet to show up. We ask the Discovery Channel director about his favorite scene in the upcoming documentary. "It's the recreation of a scene in which a number of people kill mammoths by driving them off the edge of a cliff," he said. "We shot it in Kiev. It was great."

By now, I must alternate between two pens — one always kept deep inside my layers of clothing — because of freezing ink. As I switch pens, the supporting stars walk in. Instead of proceeding onstage, they walk past the mammoth, take off their parkas, and begin to don what look like suits worn by volunteers cleaning up oil spills. "I don't know what these are for," MacPhee said when asked about their purpose. "Ask the director."



(above) A Discovery Channel cameraman adjusting a light ahead of a shooting session in the ice cave.. (right) Hairdryers lying on top of the ice block. These are used to slowly defrost the Jarkov mammoth.

Tikhonov couldn't resist making fun of the suits. "But it's okay," he quickly added. "Anything for publicity is good."

The actors assemble onstage, pick up their tools and begin work. One holds a spotlight while another fires up a hairdryer and yet another jabs at the melting ice with a brush. A cameraman, soundman, the director and several producers clamber on the platform opposite them.

"Can't you move the light away?" the cameraman asks, annoyed.

"But we won't be able to see what we're doing," MacPhee protests. He moves it anyway.

"This is made-for-TV science at its best," Richard whispers to me.

And then a discovery is made. Soft tissue! The scientists are upbeat. As the camera rolls, they coo over a thin strip of limp brown material they have chopped out of the ice. But all is not well.

"I'm disappointed," Buigues said to the camera. "When I first found the mammoth, I was expecting it to be in better condition. My first experience with the Jarkov mammoth was wonderful. But this is just the beginning. I hope other parts will be in better condition."

The faces on the other side of the ice block drop. A depressed Bernard is not what the Discovery Channel has come out to film. A series of questions follows. "Has your relationship

Defrosting the mammoth. As Discovery Channel cameras roll, the experts — dressed in their new mammoth-defrosting suits — concentrate on the ice block. From left to right are Buigues, Mol, Tikhonov, MacPhee and a Cerpolex onlooker.

with the Jarkov mammoth changed?" a producer asks in frustration.

"I've just become more rational," Buigues answers. "In the beginning, I wanted to believe in this. Then, when I first found the mammoth, I became disappointed. It was dark outside and I could see little. Then I became elated again. Now I'm feeling the same disappointment."

The producers keep prodding.

"The difference now is that I'm not alone," Buigues said, searching for something positive to say. "Others are interested. The scientists say this is a good find and this gives me energy."

Cut. The producers look at each other — if not with relief, then with the look of a job well done, on their end at least.

While the camera crew packs up its equipment, I speak to Tikhonov, still in his oil-cleaning suit.

"That's the first time I heard Bernard say something like that," he said of Buigues's confession. "I even felt sad for him. "But he's not a specialist. How was he to know there was no real mammoth? People told him there was and he believed it. But the top part of the block has thawed and refrozen many times. There's no way the remains can be whole."

Back in the hotel, Richard, who — as I have said — is writing a book on mammoths, seconded the opinion that the Jarkov mammoth holds nothing new. "What's interesting is the process — cutting out a block of ice, flying it to a cave and defrosting it slowly — no one's ever done that before."

The Return Trip

As with the apparently fruitless trip into the tundra to find the Dolgan brigade on our first day in Taimyr, the Discovery Channel's "mammoth" story seemed to crumble to pieces. (The next day, finding the ice cave empty save for a few men lugging out reindeer carcasses, my two colleagues and I were tempted to cut a piece of reindeer meat and lodge it in the ice block to become the next great find of soft tissue. Our better senses prevailed.) However — as Alexei Tikhonov pointed out — a lot more has come out of the mammoth expedition than a mammoth. For me, the real treasure was instantly apparent. The search for the Dolgan brigade opened up the tundra's beauty. And Khatanga revealed its hardscrabble yet appealing way of life.

Or did it? By the night before our departure, my two colleagues and I no longer wished to have anything to do with the Discovery Channel and its resentment of us. We had been carefully kept away from Buigues and any filming as much as possible. We declined an invitation to join in a farewell dinner and headed off to the restaurant ourselves. It was a Monday night. Inside was a large group of large Russian men, some in felt boots and baggy pants, others in black jeans and black shirts. Most sat at their tables with several bleached-blonde women. Others danced in a circle to a band playing encores of "Khatanga!" — apparently the favorite song among locals. We hadn't seen any

of them or talked to them before, but one snap of a camera was enough to send one over to our table.

"No more pictures!" he barked. We quickly agreed. Was it mafia, or just a men's night out? We left the question unanswered.

The next morning is an early one. The flight is to take off at 7:30 for Norilsk. Of course, it's delayed. But not until we wait for an hour in a cold room, then brave the walk out to the unheated plane, where we sit for another half hour. (Like several others, I wasn't wearing my thermal underwear for fear of the overheated flight from Norilsk.) We wait while airport employees scour Khatanga for tardy members of the crew. Then the weather in Norilsk is reported to be too stormy to fly, so it's back to the hotel.

When we finally get to Norilsk, we've missed our connecting flight. But we're not upset. In the calm after a large snowfall, lit up at night, Norilsk looks like a winter wonderland. It has none of the overwhelming bleakness we saw the first time through. Perhaps that's the result of our stay in Khatanga, after which any city looks impressive. But the grim Stalinist buildings now look like snow palaces. The temperature even seems warm (only 12 below). Perhaps that's also the result of freezing out on the tundra. Nevertheless, the let-up seems glorious.

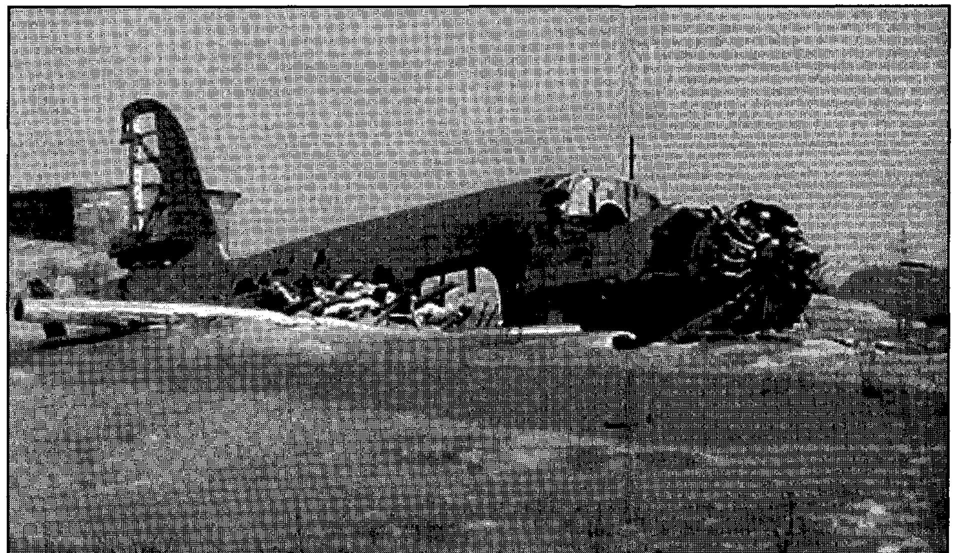
Adam and I walk to a restaurant. It's renovated and westernized and dimly lit in a pleasant way! (Where was it when we were first freezing in Norilsk?) The food is eminently edible and there's a lot more on the menu than reindeer. The crowd is chic — at least by Khatanga standards. Men sport black leather jackets and women click around in stiletto boots.

Signs of civilization are a welcome signal that it's indeed possible to create it in Taimyr. But Khatanga's camaraderie does not extend to Norilsk. Leaving Siberia, I was struck by its paradox — that unspeakably oppressive elements allowed some people to feel freer than they did in the rest of the country, especially under the Soviet Union. Aside from the shoddy quality of almost all the Soviet-era buildings and technology, the shared language and gruff informality, Taimyr felt like another country. At the same time, the middle-of-nowhere infrastructure of Khatanga and Norilsk would not have existed were it not for the pigheadedness of Soviet central planning.

After the Soviet collapse, the collective consciousness of Taimyr — the openness, the need for cooperation to withstand the cold — is also allowing for the society to change. Buigues, the West's chief representative, has been welcomed along with all those who have followed him to Khatanga. As a result, a new economy of sorts is growing, which is in part allowing the local population to continue living on Taimyr.

There is also more to the Siberian elements than oppressiveness. There is spectacular beauty. On my last evening in Khatanga, I walked a kilometer or two out of town and struck out into the middle of the Khatanga River to watch the sunset. I was completely alone except for the huskies that passed me, businesslike, loping along with not even a whiff in my direction. Behind me on the riverbanks rose the hunkered-down settlement, its residents inside, warmed by the heating plant spewing out its noxious fumes. In front was sheer white and silence. As the sun set, the sky turned a deep, fiery orange, making it seem even more remote than during the day because of its warm hue. The sky was stained with shades of purple and red and blue and yellow.

On my way back into town, deeply gratified, I passed a Dolgan family — a man, his wife and young boy — headed into the village with a sled and their beautiful husky in tow. I smiled at them. The husky, tail wagging, approached me. Wanting to send the right friendly signal, I stuck my arm out to pet the dog. It barked loudly, jumped up and tried to bite me, its slobber freezing instantly on my down coat. Perhaps I didn't fit in completely, quite yet. ❑



A decaying plane's fuselage near Khatanga's abandoned military facilities, symbolic of the decay of Russia's infrastructure. There is a real sense on Taimyr, however, that life will go on regardless.

A Dolgan family on their way into town

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