

Where Nights Are Longest: Travels by Car Through Western Russia

Colin Thubron

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Colin Thubron : Where Nights Are Longest: Travels by Car Through Western Russia before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Where Nights Are Longest: Travels by Car Through Western Russia:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Rich in prose, reflection, and too much history By 2theDI dabble in Russian travel literature and other Russian non-fiction. It's not my area of expertise (as is science fiction) but I like to read about Westerners traveling behind the Iron Curtain, a perceived geographic impermeable fixture which captivated my mind when I was young. Now I own a Fodor's guide to the Soviet Union in 1978. This was a handy reference manual when following Colin Thubron during his 1980 travels through western Russia. This information available (restaurants, museums, churches, recreation) are not to be found on the world wide web... the reinforcement provided by the Fodor's guide make the reading of Colin's travel diary much more realistic. If you are unfamiliar with the geographic specifics of the region, I would suggest using a reference like I have done (I doubt the internet would have the pertinent information). Colin traversed Western Russia in his English automobile from Poland to Moscow, north toward Leningrad and Riga, south to Kharkov and Tbilisi, and exited through Kiev and Lvov toward the Czech border. His 10,000 mile trip was facilitated by the cooperation of Intourist (the official state travel agency staffed by the KGB) who selected hotels and campsites for the him to stay at. His route was preplanned and his arrival was, nearly, always expected. However, once encamped or ensconced in a hotel, his personal agenda was largely untracked by officials

(until Lvov, that is). Able to speak Russian, he has a list of contacts to meet, mainly dissidents, schoolteachers, and friends of friends. However, his Soviet social intercourse was not limited to preplanned rendezvous. Colin's openness to the Soviet people had him being thrust into awkward, and sometimes drunken, situations with eager locals, which exposed him to a greater swathe of social representation than he was expected to encounter.-----There are a few recurring themes within the ten chapters of Colin's travel diary dealing with (1) the commoners' perceptions of their State, (2) their conceptions (and misconceptions) of the West, and (3) their notions of peace. While most of this is certainly obvious to the reader, there's also (4) a more charming subtleness which Colin instills with his keen sense of observation. (1) The commoners' perception of the State: Colin finds that the earlier generation who grew up under the umbrella of tyranny of Stalin to be more complacent with the state of the State while the newer generation, with better standards of living and more material possessions, to be more open to critical of the internal workings (or non-workings) of the Soviet Union. The youth tend to accept the system but construct defense mechanisms of artistry and Western cultural acceptance. In juxtaposition, the elders display fits of resentment or hostility to his foreign presence and scoff at his outsider's perception of their State. (2) Conceptions of the West: From Brest to Suzdal, Tallinn to Yerevan, strangers seem to be eager for all things from the West: jeans (Poland used to make poor quality jeans), gum, literature (even popular Soviet literature is repressed), music, etc. While the West can provide these luxuries, the same people seem to be hesitant to accept the technological progress of England or America; they're unsure if the capitalists also have televisions or if their economies are as regressive as the Soviet's. They denounce the blatant propaganda efforts of the State, yet tacitly infer that the West can't be as civilized as Russia. (3) Notions of peace: The Soviet people do not see their State as a threat to the West. They guffaw at the idea of anyone being afraid of their isolated Communist state of equality. They perceive the Soviet infiltration of Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Afghanistan (1979) as acts of emancipation rather than acts of "evangelistic ruthlessness" (199). State sponsored programs of peace are subjected on the people (specifically, the youth), yet the same State indoctrinates their people to believe that United States are the only purveyors of the neutron bomb, when in reality the Soviet Union is known to have tested the same weapon. The common people simply want a peaceful coexistence with the capitalist West. (4) Charming subtleness: Respecting their history by visiting popular monuments dedicated to fallen war heroes and literary masters, newly weds lay flowers in tribute to their past comrades while embracing an uncertain future with a partner. By simple token of seeing people being married denotes an unspoken greater hope that things will progress beyond petty nationalism and against the State-imposed hermetic existence. There's also an aromatic hint of self-defeat among some of the members of authority: tourist guides who imbibe in libations with the foreigner, interrogators who shrug at lack of evidence, and secret investigators who bite their tongue when exposed; they all seem complacent to the fact that the State is faltering and their presence is symbolic more than functional.-----While his prose is beautiful and his reflection unique, Colin tends to hit a historical snag and get carried away with the intricacies of old Russia. Every part of Russia is steeped in history and it's almost impossible to consider any city or people without its history, but when music, art, politics, and dance play off of the historical scaffolding, the insight into the 1980s Soviet Union is vaporized behind the semi-permeable mist of history, history, history. An earlier parallel to this sort of travel documentation would be *Journey into Russia* (1964) by Laurens van der Post. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. No. By Jayfred Boring travel tales. 2 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Too much art class but a good read. By ST Colin Thubron's travels in Russia seem like one hallucinogenic experience after another and you cannot help but wonder if he is at least fudging with the truth a little bit. His writing is often quite dark and sinister, but I suppose it's because *he's travelling in Soviet Russia*. Also he tends to go on an on in eyelid-heavy excruciating detail about anything related to art: paintings, sculpture, music, literature, you name it. On the other hand, the book is informative (though not comprehensive), and it is in general a very good read. The experiences, true or not, are remarkable. Thubron's writing and language are also very good... I suspect he'd make a very good fiction writer (no sarcasm intended).

Where Nights Are Longest is Thubron's account of his 10-thousand-mile journey through the western half of Russia, its cities and its countryside. "A magnificent achievement".--Nikolai Tolstoy.