



**Left**  
*Our forest camping adventure the night we heard gunshot and wild beasts. Nobody cared to mention it was hunting season.*

**Main**  
*The long and winding road to Vladivostok.*

the hand written customs form was fixed on with old fashioned fish gum. It was like stepping back in time.

All this was just a break from the backdrop of the headache of trying to finalise the details for the Landy's temporary American importation. Hours of internet research, wading through the advice of several different US government departments and non-governmental bodies giving conflicting information, was not encouraging. A Land Rover Defender 110 categorically does not meet the environmental and safety standards of most American agencies. But permission is available for temporary importation if you can find and fill in the right forms. It is a slow and time-consuming process and you can only do so much in advance. Eventually we got there.

We knew we had done everything we possibly could to smooth the vehicle's passage into America. The next stage was to jump on a plane, leaving Vladivostok at 1:30pm, to arrive in Anchorage, Alaska, 23 hours later at 5:30pm the same day, thanks to crossing the International Date Line along the way.

The cumulative effect of earlier delays in our journey meant we had arrived in Alaska in October, a month later than planned and after most of Alaska had closed for the season, including the public transport and ferries we had hoped to use to travel back down to Seattle. Our packs were too heavy and the roads too

EVERY SINEW of Paul's body, every cell, every nerve ending, was trained on the sounds of the night. It had been like that for 55 minutes. Ever since the sound of voices stopped him from drifting off to sleep in our tent. In our pyjamas, in our roof tent, in the dark, deep in the forest, we are at one of our most vulnerable times – least able to defend ourselves, unable to escape with any speed.

The voices were low and in Russian. Then, when the voices stopped, the sound of footsteps began, slowly, crunching the fallen autumn leaves underfoot, approaching and circling the car before moving away again. When the sound of footsteps returned, Paul felt for his knife by his side. Close to the car a large dog barked. In less than a minute there was the sound of gunshot. Then silence. The gun was close, no more than 50 yards away.

Lying very still, maintaining absolute silence, Paul strained his ears to pick up every sound, from every direction. There was movement outside, footsteps, but lighter. Human or animal? He was not sure. The adrenaline was pumping in his veins, every nerve, every cell, every sinew in a state of preparedness for action. He was clutching his knife in his hand, ready in an instant to defend his Landy, his lady, even his own life.

Then a new sound broke into his conscience, a soft purring. The shock of it hit him like another

# SHIPPING FORECAST

**From Russia to the United States is a big leap, and no-one knows that better than Paul and Helen...**

Words and Pictures by Paul and Helen Crittenden

**Above**  
*The Landy is loaded onto its container at Vladivostok, ready for the long crossing to the US.*

gunshot and he clamped his hand over my mouth, quite unable to comprehend how, while he is in such a state of high alert, I could so easily have fallen asleep.

## Siberian autumn

It had all begun quite serenely. After hitting a wild horse on the Siberian highway and a lengthy unscheduled stop at Khilok for repairs, we had headed straight for Vladivostok, our hopes of tackling the Road of Bones lying in tatters. The beautiful forests of Siberia and the Russian Far East lined the roads. A well guarded secret, these autumnal forests are easily as beautiful as the more famous New England forests in the fall.

Moving south again, towards Vladivostok, the temperatures rose a little and, despite the overcast weather, the full autumnal colour spectrum opened up, with every colour from yellow, through orange,

red and brown, vying for attention among the trees, brush and grasses.

Sadly, the road is very new, and the steep sides made it virtually impossible to get off the road to camp at night and we had spent too many nights camping in roadside café car parks, among the noisy old Soviet lorries running their engines and generators to keep their drivers warm.

When some other travellers in Vladivostok had given us directions to an area of forest suitable for camping just outside the city, we jumped at the opportunity for some peace and quiet away from the city for a few days before the Landy was containerised for his trip to America. We hadn't bargained on the hunters being out and about.

As it was, the hunters picked up their prey and left us alone that night in the forest and a couple of days later we returned to the city. By now we had re-packed the Landy ready

for shipping, and everything we would need for the next four weeks was packed into rucksacks.

Back in Vladivostok, we found a VIP valet service where the Landy had what was the most powerful jet wash we have ever seen, almost lifting the young operator off his feet. At one point the vehicle completely disappeared under a sea of soap bubbles. Mud oozed from places we didn't know dirt could get and flowed down the drains. The Defender was spotless, cleaner than it had been since we got it.

We signed the final papers, handed over a large sum of money and supervised the loading into a 20ft container, which we had agreed to share with a motorbike belonging to an American on his way home to Montana. Little did we know what a mistake that would turn out to be.

With the Land Rover containerised ready for shipping we had nearly two weeks left before our own flights out of Russia. We explored the old Russian naval

port of Vladivostok, visiting the submarine museum, checking out the many monuments, the funicular railway and the monument to Cyril and Methodius, the founders of the Cyrillic Alphabet which Paul had wrestled with since we had first arrived in Kazakhstan.

We marvelled at the service in the post office. The sight of the old Brother sewing machine behind the counter had left us perplexed, until we saw the parcels double wrapped in individually sewn muslin covers before being sealed with sealing wax. Our own parcel of one CD was carefully taken by the counter clerk, a piece of cardboard cut to size and folded around the CD, then hand wrapped in brown paper and tied with string, deftly secured with some complicated looking knots, before

We found a nice forest spot suitable for camping, but hadn't bargained on the hunters being out and about



**Top left**  
*The extent of the cold weather on our tow rope.*  
**Left**  
*Monument to Cyril and Methodius in Vladivostok.*



reloaded, moved again. They then decided they wanted the Landy to be steam cleaned, which would involve moving the container, unloading, cleaning, inspecting, reloading and moving again. We were not allowed to be in the port area during any of this.

After the first week we had to pay for our container to remain in port. Every time someone moved, unloaded, inspected, reloaded or did anything with our container or its contents, we get charged, whether it's labour, drayage, x-ray or steam cleaning. No-one could tell us how much it was going to cost. It felt as if someone had opened a book on us but given us no say or control over how much it would add up to. We would get the bill at the end, to be paid before our vehicle could be released.

Then the final bombshell. An email pops into our inbox. If our shipment is not cleared within 10 days it will be crushed.

The USDA cannot tell us how long it will take to get our vehicle steam cleaned, inspected and released. We are given the option of arranging to have our container shipped back out of port, at our expense, on top of all the other expenses. "Where to?" we ask. "Anywhere". They don't care. It's that, or we sit and wait and pray that everyone can get their act together in time.

We sold virtually everything to get this far, and the bill to get into the US is growing exponentially. Almost everything we own is in that vehicle, and they want to crush it because different government agencies are taking their time deciding what to do!

We feel powerless, and at our lowest ebb. The cost and responsibility is ours, but the control is theirs. Surely our dream can't end this way?



*After a good night's sleep we realised we were snowed in at the car park in Chita.*

our own website and the original advertisement on Craig's List to verify our strange story and let us go. We sped away with all due haste before he had a chance to change his mind.

Pausing at Seattle, we had the Jeep's transmission fixed (it had been leaking fluid for days), ascertained the Land Rover was not going to be released any day soon, and headed on towards Florida. Between Seattle and Florida the Jeep's tyres finally hit bald and had to be renewed.

Although Florida's sweltering heat should have been a joy after the cold of Alaska and Canada, with only arctic clothes in our rucksacks it was a relief to fly back to snowy Seattle and a timely invite to a Thanksgiving dinner. It had been quite a road trip. 6,000 miles in 10 days of driving. Some eight times the length of the UK.

**newfound despair**  
Our relief was short lived. Things were not looking good. Homeland Security had chosen our container to be included in the 50% of containers they x-ray, involving several days of moving the container from one part of the port to another and back again. Although they didn't want to investigate our container further, the US Department of Agriculture did. Because they deemed the motorbike to be in their way, the whole lot had to be moved, unloaded, inspected,

Sign Post Forest, where one of the soldiers building the road during World War II had felt homesick enough to put up a sign saying how far it was to his home town. The idea flourished and now at that spot there are thousands of signposts to towns all over the world.

Passing back into the US from Canada gave us one of those experiences we will still be telling in our dotage. We were foreigners. We were driving someone else's car. We had picked the car up from storage. We didn't actually know the address of the owners of the vehicle, we had never met them, we barely knew their surname, we didn't know how old they were. We recited the disjointed information we had: she was six months pregnant,

he had been posted to Florida with the US Navy, her parents lived in Sacramento. Sitting in the immigration office, while being fired a barrage of questions we could not answer we realised we hadn't checked the car with a fine tooth comb to see if anyone had stashed drugs anywhere. Visions of jail and sensational news headlines floated before our eyes. Finally, the border guard found the blogs on

up in front of us. We filled up with fuel at the last truck stop out of town just past Fairbanks and drove on up the Dalton Highway to cross the only bridge over the rapidly freezing Yukon River. The Alaskan oil pipeline, carrying its cargo down from Prudhoe Bay, ran alongside much of the road we travelled. Reaching the Arctic Circle we pulled off the road, a few minutes behind a posse of off-duty soldiers. We were as surprised as each other to find other tourists there at the beginning of November.

**plain sailing**  
The next morning we learned, not for the first time, that the shipping company had changed the schedule. The Landy's ship would now dock two weeks early. We had to get to

Seattle as soon as possible. We headed off again, calling in first at the dreadful town of North Pole, where they celebrate Christmas all year round. We drove the length of the Alaskan Highway, and bought a sticker to prove it. It was nearly as twisting and turning as the Dalton Highway had been, and just as icy for much of it, providing some interesting driving conditions. One of the few stops we made was at

*Beautiful autumnal scenery in Siberia.*

## Not for the first time, the shipping company changed the schedule – our boat was two weeks early

little travelled to even consider hitch-hiking. Our options appeared to be either to fly back to Seattle or hire a small car on one way rental.

Until someone suggested Craig's List. There we found an advert from a young woman who used to live in Anchorage but had moved to Florida with her husband a few months ago, and wanted someone to deliver her Jeep Laredo to Florida. We negotiated an agreement that would allow us to explore a bit of Alaska before leaving the State, and all during the time our own Landy would still be on the ship coming over from Vladivostok. We joked about not telling the Land Rover that we would be driving a Jeep.

We collected the Jeep from storage. It was a mobile disaster area. The owner's puppy had chewed up the inside, leaving holes in the seats, and most knobs and switches missing or mangled. The owner's sister had borrowed the car and added her own layer of chaos, with spilt nail varnish, old tickets and sticky sweets, topped off with the smell of stale cigarettes. We cleaned it the best we could, and after an oil change, replacement windscreen and Heath Robinson bodge on the burnt out heater, we set off.

It was worth it for the scenery. A black and white vista opened up, with snow covered mountains rising before us, and freezing rivers passing below the roadbridges. Huge spectacular gulches opened

