

WHERE IS TUVA?

It is said to be the geographical centre of Asia, and is totally surrounded by mountains, the "Sayani" at the North the "Tannu Ola" at the South and the "Altai" at the west (the highest in all Siberia). 1000 km south of Siberian super-city of Krasnoyarsk and just to the north of outer Mongolia, it is the smallest and most remote republic in the Russian Federation. Surrounded by the high mountains and with no railway or regular direct flights it's no party to get to.

Tuva is about - 51° N + 94° E (as north as Britain and as east as Bangladesh). It can reach temperatures in the -40's in winter, and +30's in summer. It's history stretches back to Chinese and Persian accounts from Rashid ad din, and currently has a population of around 300,000, with 90,000 living in the capital Kyzyl alone.

Despite an abundance of both cultural and natural riches, Tuva is a poor place, dependent on the Russian rouble to keep the modern Soviet infrastructure going - hospitals, schools etc. Even in the capital there are no pubs, hotels, or anything other than the most basic shops and gangster-culture is rife. There are often great shortages, pensions and wages are not paid, adult life expectancy has fallen dramatically since the fall of Communism and USA Today reports that the country suffers the highest rate of syphilis in the Russian Federation.

Life is particularly difficult for young people - they have no jobs, no future and no ideals or ideas about what they are meant to do. Traditionally a hunter-gatherer nation, these are the first generations to grow up in dreary concrete apartment blocks. Already the villages are breaking up and people are crowding the city looking for work. Alcohol is another big problem and is good friends with unemployment – although this is sometimes alleviated by the thud of call-up papers on the mat, sending young men to fight the miserable war in Chechnya.

The alcohol problem is so bad that some folk are literally dying for a drink, concocting vodka from technical, or wood, alcohol and frequently poisoning themselves, and their friends, with the resulting brew. This is so common that now, that if there are too many deaths in one village, in a rare display of largesse the government will send a truckload of vodka to the area which people can then swap, bottle-for-bottle, hooch-for-legit.

The Tuvans – who Albert describes as the aboriginal people of Siberia - also suffer racism at the hands of Russians – cries of 'Get back to the tundra' will follow them in the street and in much of the Federation they will be stopped frequently by police

checking their passports for proof of Russian citizenship simply because they look of Asian, rather than white Russian, origin.

In Tuva electricity is at a premium, rarely available after 10pm, despite the devastation of a huge swathe of the country by the erection of the largest hydro-electric Dam in the world (which in a masterpiece of planning runs on oil that has to be piped in from 100's of kilometres away – instead of utilising the abundant local fossil fuels). An enormous area of the plains was flooded forever - now there is a huge lake (but only in summer - not in winter and spring when you can still see the old drowned towns) and previous residents were forcibly moved out of their homelands, again towards the city.

Tuva is however spectacularly beautiful. There are lots of fast icy cold rivers flowing into the valleys that then flow into 3 of the main rivers - Kaa-Khem, Bi-Khem and Khemchik. "Khem" means river and together they make up the "Ulug Khem" or Great River (known in Russian as "Yenisei"). Around these rivers are lovely woods and beyond that the steppe where animals like cows are very happy, as long as they stay out of reach of the wolves, bears and snow leopards which also roam the country.

For further information please call Kelly Pike on 020 8621 2345 or e-mail kpikopr@globalnet.co.uk

For regional PR contact Sarah Wells 020 72631240 or email folk babe@blueyonder.co.uk