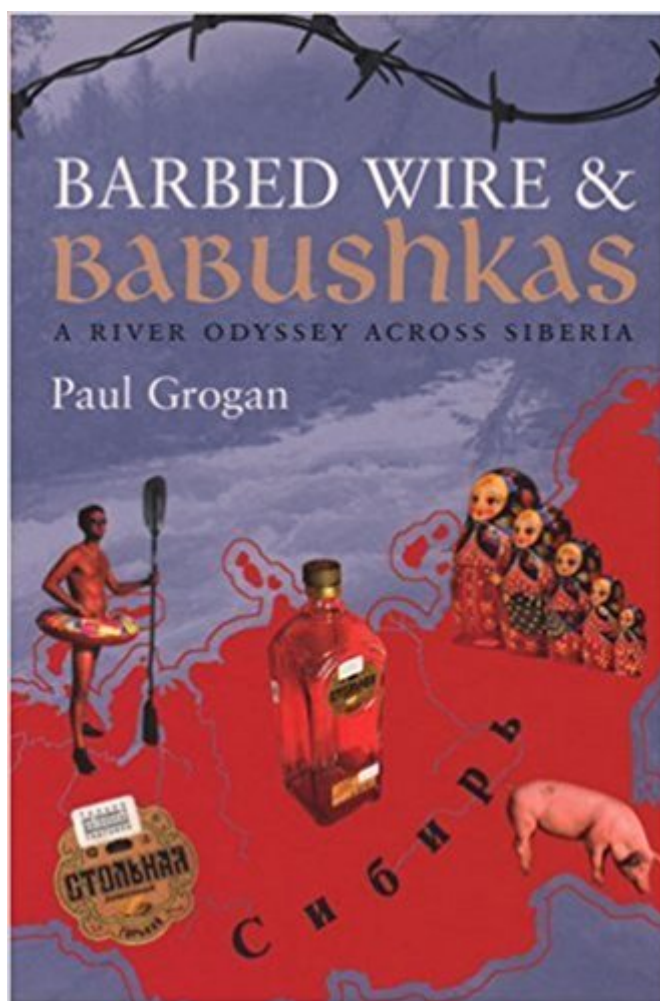


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Barbed Wire & Babushkas: A River Journey Along Siberia's Forbidden Frontier



Synopsis

Victor was clearly concerned about our plans to travel along the border, promising that the guards would shoot us on sight: 'They will be made heroes, with medals from Moscow,' he thundered, slapping his chest, 'but you will be dead!' And with that, he moulded his hands around an imaginary machine gun and sprayed our chests with an impressive salvo of spittle. For years they'd dreamed of packing in their day-jobs and travelling one of the world's greatest rivers, so long as it was somewhere warm. Siberia seemed like the obvious choice...Starting from high in the mountains of northern Mongolia, Paul Grogan and travelling companion Richard Boddington set out to make the first source-to-sea descent of Siberia's 4,400km Amur River, known in China as The Black Dragon. After wading up-stream for five days to reach the source, they begin their epic, four-month journey knowing virtually nothing about the region they'll be travelling through, or even where they'll be able to find food along the way. One of the few things they do know about the river is that for almost 2,000km it forms the long-disputed border between Russia and China. The scene of armed conflict up until the late 1980's, it's still considered off-limits, even to Russians. Never sure if they'll be able to continue around the next bend, the pair face guns, gunboats and arrest at every turn, and are forbidden to even set foot in Chinese territory. But beyond this facade of military might they find a generous, warm-hearted people with a wicked sense of humour and an unhealthy predilection for poetry, pig fat and home-made vodka. With sun, sauna's and dancing girls also high on the agenda, they are soon swept along by life on the river and the occasional 4 a.m. flood.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Journalist and photographer Paul Grogan canoed down the Zambezi and cycled solo from Canada to Mexico when he was barely out of school. In 2000 he was awarded a Winston Churchill Travel Fellowship. Now he is a travel writer for the Times, the Traveller and Wanderlust. He lectures at travel clubs such as Globetrotters in the West End and has well-established contacts throughout the travel industry.

An odyssey is, according to Merriam-Webster, 1: a long wandering or voyage usually marked by many changes of fortune, or 2: an intellectual or spiritual wandering or quest. Grogan's account of his friend's and his kayak trip on the Amur fits neither definition. It's an easy read and the text flows very nicely from the author's pen, sprinkled with colourful British expressions such as "we were soaked to our short and curlies". As travel literature, though, it does not yield much of interest. Clearly clueless about the regions they are paddling through (and even sort of boasting about being so on the back of the book!), they just go through exactly what you'd expect from an undertaking like this. So we follow them through 267 pages of the obvious. There are Russian border officials with tall hats and a liking for bribes. There are Russians drinking and offering vodka everywhere. Sometimes it's raining, sometimes it's sunny. Maybe the only slightly surprising piece of information in the book is that our heroes actually gain weight during the trip, as the water in the river moves so swiftly that they don't actually have to paddle to keep moving. Obvious is not good enough, and it could have been fixed by providing more thought and background information about the state of the communities they float past and sometimes stop in. Unfortunately the author has not been willing to do any research at all, so the book ends up sticking no further below the surface than his kayak ever did during the trip. A merry mood is maintained throughout the book, and I have no doubt that the paddlers/floaters enjoyed their trip immensely. I had hoped that so would I, but I am a bit disappointed.

Two clueless amateurs take off to canoe the Amur from the source to the sea. The book's lightweight in every respect. If they haven't lied about their lack of prior preparation, then their carelessness verges on the idiotic. The worst danger they faced was the possibility of a shakedown by the local heavies or being deported. The only thing I've learnt of interest, is that Siberia is teeming with attractive women who just want to practice their English and drink vodka with scruffy foreigners. Pretty much the whole theme of the book is : bored, floating down the river, shakedown by corrupt/surprisingly honest guards, get drunk with beautiful women. This lightweight book stands in interesting contrast to Colin Thubron's much bleaker, thoughtful, better researched and obviously

better written "In Siberia". The contrast is specially glaring, when they visit the same cities.

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