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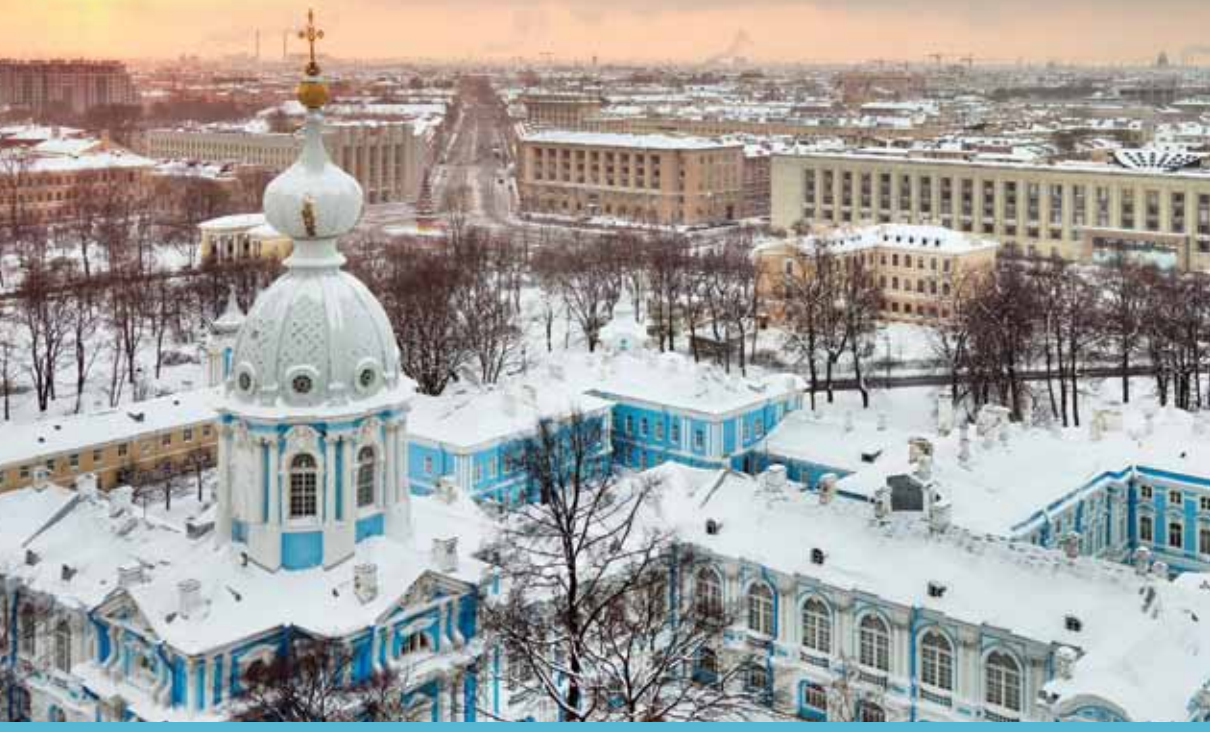


# Europe @ 2.4 km/h

# KEN HALEY

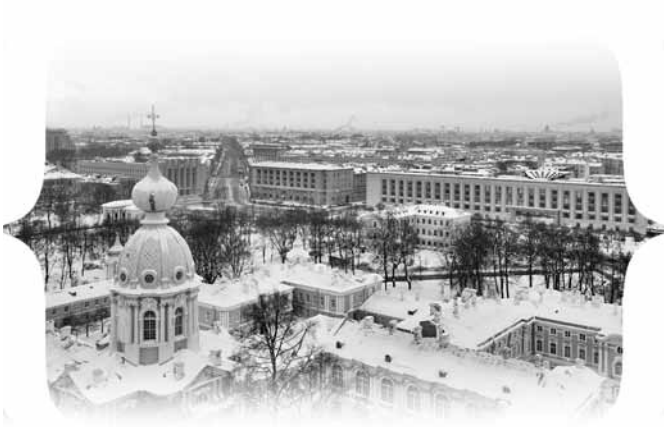
Wakefield Press

# Europe @ 2.4 km/h

Ken Haley is one of Australia's most widely travelled authors. He became a paraplegic in 1991, but so far as Ken is concerned the only difference that has made is that he now observes the world from a seated position. A journalist by profession, he has had stints on the foreign desk of *The Times*, *Sunday Times* and *Observer* in London, the *Gulf Daily News* in Bahrain and the *South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong. He has also worked at the *Age*, Melbourne, and as a newspaper sub-editor in Athens, Hong Kong and Johannesburg. Until recently he was the editor of the *Dimboola Banner*.

Also by Ken Haley

*Emails from the Edge*



# Europe @ 2.4 km/h

# KEN HALEY

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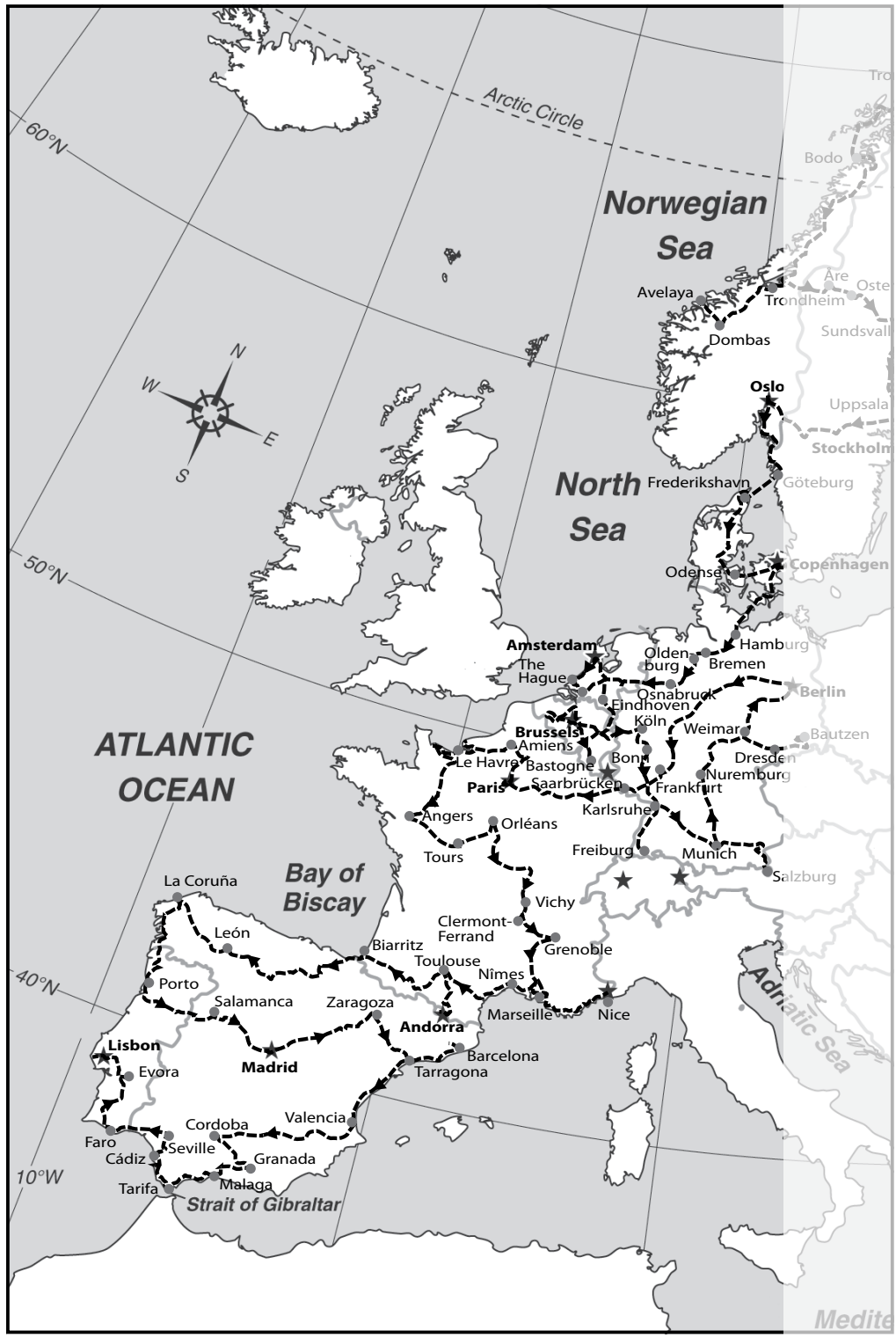
# Contents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Dombas
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Göteburg
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Amsterdam
The Hague
Olden burg
Hamburg
Bremen
Osnabruck
Berlin
Eindhoven
Köln
Weimar
Bautzen
Brussels
Amiens
Le Havre
Bastogne
Bonn
Dresden
Paris
Saarbrücken
Frankfurt
Nuremburg
Karlsruhe
Angers
Orléans
Tours
Freiburg
Munich
Salzburg
La Coruña
Vichy
Clermont-Ferrand
León
Biarritz
Grenoble
Toulouse
Nîmes
Porto
Salamanca
Zaragoza
Marseille
Nice
Andorra
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Barcelona
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Valencia
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Faro
Seville
Cádiz
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Tarifa
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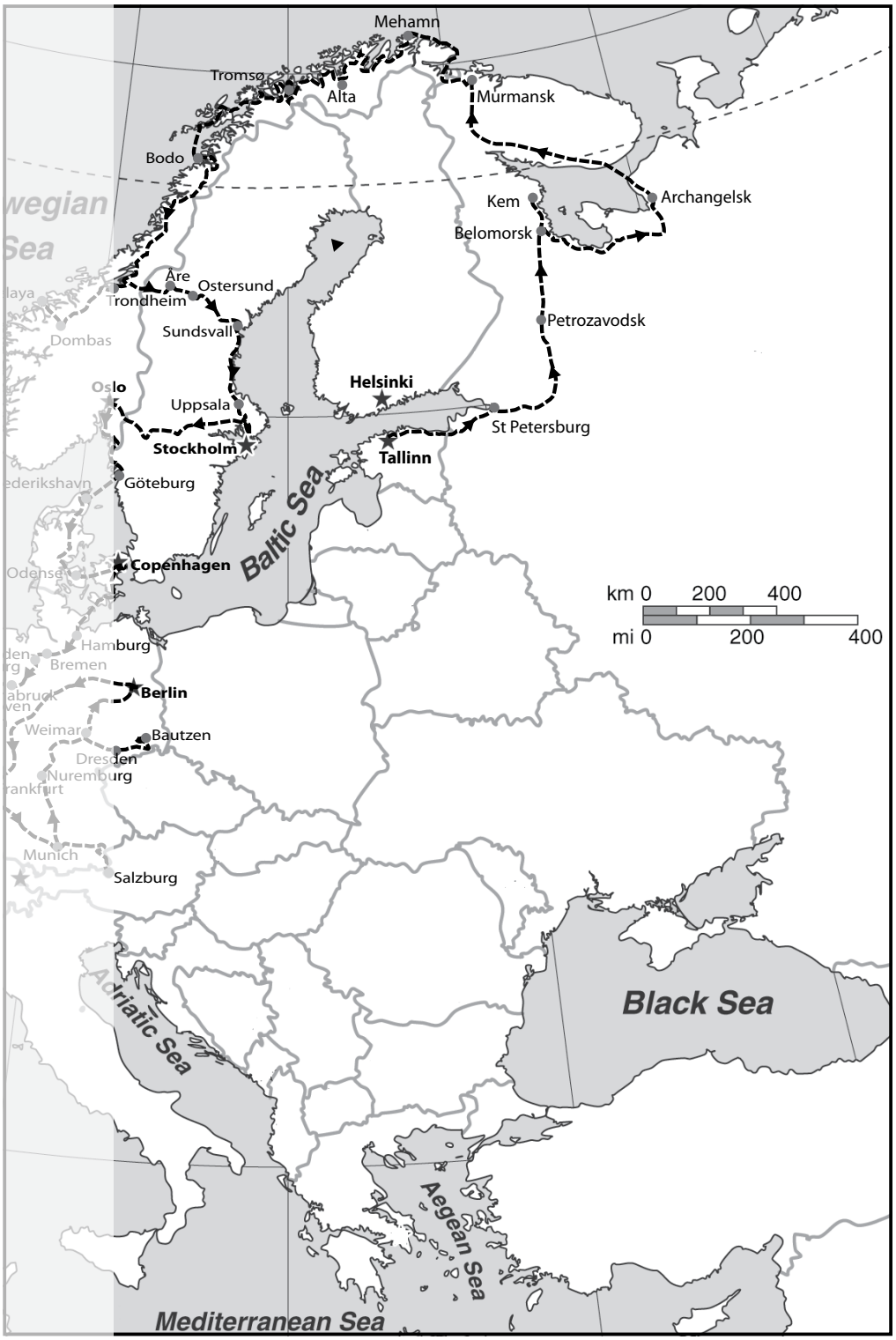
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Weimar
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Nuremburg
Munich
Salzburg
Black Sea
Adriatic Sea
Aegean Sea
Mediterranean Sea

*Nous voulons voyager sans vapeur et sans voile!*
*Faites, pour égayer l'ennui de nos prisons,*
*Passer sur nos esprits, tendus comme une toile,*
*Vos souvenirs avec leurs cadres d'horizons.*

We long to travel not by steam or sail,
For here in prison every day's the same.
Oh, paint across the canvas of our soul
Your memoirs, with horizons as their frame.

Charles Baudelaire,
*Les Fleurs du Mal*,
Part III, Verse 2
LE VOYAGE

*To Nin,*
*for all your love in the unconditional past, perfect.*

# Prologue

## Which Europe Would That Be?

What am I doing here in Europe? You might well ask; I ask myself. Surely there can be nothing new under the European sun, you say, nowhere on the face of the globe will you find real estate more tramped over, fought over, written about. Even the ancients called it 'the known world'.

At school, 'European' was often bracketed with 'explorer'. The first pictures we received of these mavericks from the other end of the world portrayed them as heading out to the lands of 'lesser breeds', discovering societies that didn't have enough sense to know they were lost. Well, the Europeans' world might be 'known' to them but, 400 years later, we in their Antipodes have our own 'known world'. So, I tell myself, perhaps it's time to return the compliment and go exploring the Old World anew.

The European explorers set off in search of spice and riches. If my only spice turns out to be the piquancy of human behaviour, my only riches the joy of the journey itself and of witnessing the cultures I roam among, so be it. We live in different times, or so we like to believe. I come in peace, O Father of Continents, and have no desire to conquer you. Let others treat you as a glittering bauble, your attractions all obvious, all external. For me, Europe is a magic box. I yearn to know what's inside, and to find out I will try to grasp it at both ends, north and south, to turn it round, shake it a little.

Four years since my last European landfall, I am picking up where I left off – Tallinn, Estonia – and tomorrow will ring in the grandeur of St Petersburg. After traipsing across that vastness of 'European Russia' which goes by the name of Karelia, I will light out for the northernmost reaches of the only continent we call the Continent before pursuing a host of detours that land me, finally, on the road to Portugal.

It's fair to say I'm on a quest. But as I hurtle 39,000 feet over the Urals, in an arc that will touch down at Frankfurt, the object of that quest appears as insubstantial as the clouds outside my window.

A week before leaving Australia I was having a drink with two colleagues during a mid-shift break and found myself hard pressed to say what was so special, uniquely European, about Europe. When I suggested that Europe stood for the idea that humans were destined to subdue or govern the natural world rather than coexist passively with it, one of my colleagues scoffed, 'You could say the same about Australia or America'. Conceding his point – perhaps too readily, given that Australia and America are 'European' societies, too – I found myself back at square one. Not to worry, I would have plenty of time to ponder the question further: seven-and a-half months of it.

In a direct line, the northern point of this landmass lies about 5000 km from its southern tip. But this will be a journey of tangents, not short cuts. By visiting its northern, southern and western extremities, I aim almost literally to comprehend the whole, to encompass what lies between the extremities, to open the lid on this magic box of Europe. How much room can there be inside for secrets? Next to my homeland, Australia, it is the smallest as well as the oldest-named of all those pieces of the terrestrial jigsaw we call continents. Surely, when the shaking has stopped, I will know what enticed me here: the culture, the scenery, the 'European spirit' (if such a thing exists), the people themselves. Or all of the above and then some.

In Hong Kong, a couple of days before my flight to Europe, I read in the *South China Morning Post* an article about Sierra Leonean ex-child soldiers being educated in a Spanish college, prompting the thought that one thing Europe must stand for is the belief its values are universal. Sometimes this presumption has been put to questionable use, as in the exploitative aspect of colonialism; and sometimes to benign use, as reflected in the inclusiveness and generosity of spirit exhibited in that Spanish initiative.

Yet, when six months later I reach the European town closest of all to Africa, I will find this shaft of illumination blotted out by a much darker, indeed shameful, facet of the Continental character.

To complicate my attempts to get to grips with Europe – which is, after all, where we Westerners hail from – I reminded myself that the clarity provided by maps was always going to be too vague to be universally acceptable. As I'd noted years ago, if you use Europe as a

geographical label one glance at an atlas will suffice to establish that almost all of Turkey (97 per cent, in case you were wondering) is in Asia and, whatever the Cypriots think, their island is wholly non-European. (Eight months later, in *The Economist's* annual review of the world,[1] I read with astonishment that the new €1 coin entering the union's currency in 2008 shows Cyprus due south of Italy, many kilometres west of its true location.)

To be fair, some people have argued that Europe is not a continent at all – and technically they are right. It is a trio of peninsulas at the pointy end of Eurasia (now that's a *real* continent) as much as a set of values, a cultural legacy or an economic club.

If it's any of these three, the question immediately arises: can anyone join? No one can rightly dispute the contribution that Jewish culture has made over many centuries to European ideals, most obviously in the religious sphere. And maybe it is because so many of Israel's settlers came from Europe that, to take what might on the surface seem a trivial example, the Israeli national football team takes part in the European competition.

Truly, the closer I get to Europe – and, with the Urals a receding memory, my plane is now over Warsaw, beginning its descent – the further I seem to be from understanding the mysterious contents of this 'known world' spread out beneath my feet. The magic box conceals its treasures well. As I am soon to discover, the meaning of Europe has bamboozled sharper intellects than mine. For all I know, most Europeans share my bafflement. Perhaps, it occurs to me, there is no such entity, in the sense Margaret Thatcher had in mind when she said there was no society. Or could it be that they are making it up as they go along?

Nor is the difficulty of pinning Europe down anything new. One of my favourite lines in 20th-century literature is uttered by a Damon Runyon character seated at a table in a Lower East Side diner when a mobster parks himself opposite and quietly informs him that 'the Boss' back in Chicago has a little job to be dispatched on the other side of the Atlantic, over in Europe. Our nervous hero, as Runyon records, not wishing to appear reluctant but equally anxious to play for time, replies, 'And which Europe would that be?'

My question, my quest, exactly.

Then again, I tell myself, maybe I'm missing the obvious point:

aren't Europeans all about activity (doing) while Asians are more contemplative (being)? I was contemplating just this point at Hong Kong International Airport before we boarded this flight when my meditation was interrupted by a young man ambling through the transit lounge, calling out to everyone in general and no one in particular, 'Hurry, hurry, hurry'.

This struck me as odd, since no one could go anywhere until the clearance for boarding was given. But his clarion call became more urgent by the second until everyone was listening to him.

'Hurry, hurry, hurry,' he repeated.

'*Hare, hare,* Krishna, Rama. *Hare, hare*.'

Europe this was not.

CHAPTER 1

# Magnetic North

## *RUSSIA*

| | |
|---|---|
| Time spent: | 28 days |
| Distance covered: | 3102 km |
| Distance pushed: | 136.8 km |
| Average speed: | 2.399 km/h |
| Journey distance to date: | 3102 km |

Europe, we hardly know you. Yet we willingly fool ourselves into believing you are the most familiar of destinations. The mere sound of your name conjures up the Eiffel Tower, the Colosseum, the highest of high culture. To many minds, you are a byword for civilisation itself. But how many cheers can you raise for a civilisation that unleashed the greatest bloodletting in the history of the planet, not once but twice in as many generations?

'But,' I hear you plead, 'it's not fair to judge me by my worst moments.'

OK, we can do better than that, refusing to judge you at all – at least until we're better acquainted. So let's get a proper look at you, see how well we recognise you at closer quarters. Never interested in sightseeing for its own sake, I will nevertheless visit many of your 'unmissable' landmarks. But through the experience of travelling in many lands I have found certain principles that are likely to make any journey more memorable. And the greatest of these is the value of the unexpected encounter, the unforeseen episode, the uncommon character. If you're in it for the long haul, you have to be a voyager for all seasons, but there is bound to be more of the unknown lying in store if you go 'out of season'.

Armchair viewers of Discovery channel and readers of *National*

*Geographic* think they know what this part of the world is like, because they've seen the pictures – and a Mediterranean beach in summer is one cliché among many. But try to picture what it's like at latitude 70° N in summer, or imagine the Riviera in winter, and it's not so obvious. Even in the 'known world' you can find many a road less travelled.

The unfamiliarity principle is why, it seems to me, many of the best moments in a journey take the form of pleasant surprises. Others, more precisely termed epiphanies – when everything seems right with the world and it's beyond us to explain why – will also occur. If there's one thing to be expected from the long haul, it's the unexpected.

Since the beginning of May is the earliest time of year when you can go to Russia confident of not ending up icebound, it seems the most auspicious moment to embark on this crossing, which by the middle of December will have taken me across twelve countries.

Never staying long in one place, or in one type of place, is another defining feature of the way I travel. It is only half in jest that I tell inquirers this is a solo journey undertaken in the company of millions. This time out, I will spend just under two weeks in Amsterdam, and the same length of time in Paris, but at most halts just one or two nights. These 230 sleeps from May to December 2007 will nearly all be spent in 90 cities, towns or villages – not counting the nights spent on buses, trains or, literally, at sea – giving an average of less than two-and-a-half days per destination.

And where to lay my sorry head? Hostels (46 per cent of the time), hotels (38 per cent), guesthouses or private homes (13 per cent); and I will even get myself to the odd monastery or nunnery. It's one way to be sure of meeting a greater variety of people. Among this cast of thousands, though I could never have guessed it in advance, will be a Portuguese Buddhist restaurateur, the Governor of Gibraltar, and family I never knew I had – almost of all them Europeans who answer to another name.

My onward flight is about to touch down in Tallinn, a copybook landing. But for all the research and preparation carried out beforehand I'm on a collision course with this oh-so-familiar Continent that is truly incognito. Civilised, advanced, arrogant, self-entranced:

preconceptions exist to be modified, even shattered. The seatbelt sign is off. I'm ready for the adventure to begin.

This Baltic capital does its best to oblige. It is the evening of 27 April. Just a couple of hours ago, political tensions between Estonian Estonians and Russian Estonians erupted in the city streets. On my way into town I see every second plate-glass window smashed, where the wave of violence rolled out of town along the highway to Estonia's favourite seaside resort, Parnu.

So, are the Europeans back to their bad old ways? For what will prove to be the only time this year Estonia is making world headlines, confronting this fresh arrival with a textbook example of what is possibly the core issue gripping Europe today (and for as long back in history as you care to go): identity. Asked where they come from, as I will discover, few people count themselves as Europeans first and last. This stands in stark contrast with the answers you would get if you asked the same question of Americans, Australians or, for that matter, Chinese.

As the currency-exchange officer at the airport explains, a Soviet worker-hero statue that had been at the centre of contention between the Russian and Estonian communities was removed this morning (by the Estonian Estonians), infuriating Russian youths who 'trashed' the town. As I near the city centre, a police helicopter overhead exemplifies the menace in the air – and a quiet night in the suburbs suddenly seems appealing. I hear later from the Russian side that what inflamed their ire more was the simultaneous transfer of the remains of the Soviet soldiers buried under it.

Ask a Russian 'How are you?' and you may well get the answer '*Normalno*'. Tomorrow, one day closer to my departure for Russia, I will see a sign in the window of a Tallinn restaurant that reads CELEBRATING FRIENDSHIP. But right now the window itself, along with such pious hopes, has been shattered.

### Kilometre Zero

May Day is always a good time to visit Russia. The bus from Tallinn heading due east to St Petersburg begins rolling just a minute after 6 am. Right on cue, the sun rises in a cloudless sky. Now the shards of glass have been swept away, everything is back to 'normal, no?'

On every budget trip I permit myself one small luxury. Last

time it was a GPS device; this time round, the gadget of choice is a speedometer, supplied by a bicycle shop in faraway Melbourne. At any hour of the day or night, all I will have to do to know how far I have gone, and how fast I am going, is to glance at this technological marvel perched on the side of my wheelchair.

Speed = distance ÷ time. A diary divided into days will not do: what marks my progress from one side of the Continent to the other will be how many kilometres I propel myself with two determined hands.

Of course, on a train or bus, or when my wheels are stationary, the speedometer will not register progress. But how far those vehicles take me is something I can estimate later, consulting maps. When I look down, it's the distance covered by my personal transport that captures my attention.

I look out the window at a white cloak of snow draped around the village of Aapsere. Half an hour down this road lies Russia, and just before 9 am this crisp, clean morning in the northern spring of 2007 I enter Churchill's well-wrapped enigma for the first time since 1985, when it was part of the Soviet Union.

To discover Europeanness, it stands to reason, all I have to do is meet Europeans, and here in European Russia seems as good a place as any to start. That notion collides with reality right away. Can 'my first Russian' be a typical European? I wonder.

At the Russian border town of Ivangorod I am 'greeted' by a woman in a pale-yellow sweater and blue parka whose face is a picture of surpassing sorrow, as if she has just stared Death in the face. It is a face that raises so many questions but answers none. Instinctively, I present my passport to a colleague with a visage less grim, the first and last time I'll need to do so, courtesy of the 'European idea' of integration, which clearly hasn't reached this corner of the continent. I even manage to winkle polite laughter out of this colleague by wishing a 'Happy May Day'. Luckily, he isn't plunged in gloom by the irony of working on the workers' holiday.

I didn't really expect to see any reminders of the communist era still standing, but on the border a sign announces that here, 148 km from St Petersburg, we are entering the district of Leningradskaya. Suddenly I find myself in one country but two universes, and they are evidently not parallel.

**1 km**

Half an hour of pushing myself around St Petersburg is enough to remind me why this civic gem appeals to the Russian imagination in a way that leaves Moscow for dead. Red, white and blue flags rest in holders yoked to light poles like troikas.

Then, just as I'm reflecting on the power of Russian patriotism, I spot a Mongol face among the crowd swarming down Nevsky Prospekt, the city's main boulevard, a vivid reminder that Russians are ethnically no 'purer' than that other glorious mongrel breed, the English. Students of English history know that the Danes and Norwegians invaded the Angles' land towards the end of the first millennium. Less familiar is the fact that, ever since the sixth century, Vikings raided, traded, and invaded the lands of the Slavs, where from the ninth century onwards they founded a series of city states.

Historians suspect that the name of the Viking clan that founded the mini-state of Kyiv (from which the Ukrainian capital, Kiev, derives its name) was Rus, the great-granddaddy of what we call 'Russia'.[2] In 1223 the fiefs that would form the core of today's state, foremost among them Muscovy, were overrun by the Mongols. Today, on Nevsky Prospekt, a face in the crowd has reminded me of that fact.

**2 km**

St Petersburg International, one of the few youth hostels in this city of five million, has a surprise or two in store. All the rooms are on the fourth floor, and there is no lift access. But the manager, a lateral or rather vertical thinker, arranges to bring a bed down from on high to the staff 'common room', which is generously vacated for the six nights of my stay. And – a bonus, this – the TV there has more channels than I've ever seen available on one set (300) so I venture into the world outside only after surfing from a concert in Kurdistan to a debate in Milan via al-Jazeera.

**3 km**

Meet Ivan Baranov, principal doorman at the Nevsky Palace Hotel, a five-star establishment on the boulevard of broken flagstones. All gold braid and broad smile, he greets me with a disclaimer, 'I am

not from here. I come from a small town in Belarus, far to south'.

Introduction leads to revelation. 'This is my duty, guarding the door, but in the deep of my soul I am happy to remain a peasant.' And, once he learns where I am from, revelation extends to request. 'I want to ask you about farming in Australia. Could I get work in your country fleecing the sheep? This is my dream.

'From my early days I work on a farm. I know how to feed the pigs,' he assures me with wide-eyed trust. At a loss to know what to advise, I suggest Ivan contact the Australian Embassy in Moscow but, several steps ahead of me, he proceeds to display an expert's knowledge of Canberra's immigration points system.

**4 km**

I see I've spent one hour 40 minutes pushing the chair, 'progressing' a dismal 4.1 km. This works out at 2.46 km/h: I don't think I had any idea of how fast I would go, but this really is snail's pace (if you can picture a snail on wheels).

**18 km**

Time to check those must-see lists. Paris? Eiffel Tower. Tick. The Louvre. Tick. Berlin? The Brandenburg Gate. Tick. Berlin Wall remnant. Tick. St Petersburg? The Hermitage. Tick.

To see the world-famous museum opposite is no problem. Housed in the tsars' 250-year-old Winter Palace, it would be infinitely more difficult to avoid. But to see the Hermitage collection? Now that's impossible, for two reasons. You would need to visit every day for a month to see the fraction that is on display, and even then most of the treasures are locked away in storerooms. Still, nothing would have kept me away from following up my previous visit to its great galleries one bitter day 23 Februaries ago. And then, just as this visit begins, I in turn am visited by a great stroke of luck.

While I wait for the stair lift to be lowered, and explore my wallet for the admittance fee of 350 roubles (about A$17.50), an attendant approaches, face beaming, and says, 'Did you know that entrance is free on the first Thursday of every month?' I do a single take, thinking: Gosh, today's Thursday, and then a double: Hey, today's the third of May!

This is not an art book, but I must mention a few reasons why

the Hermitage always leaves its visitors in awe. First, there is the grandeur of the green, white and gold palace itself. On the ceiling above the grand Jordan Staircase is a restored classical painting that shows the gods on Mt Olympus.

Unfamiliarity springs an early surprise in the form of a larger-than-life gilt diorama of a peacock atop a tree stump, flanked by an owl and a rooster that work this bizarre chronometer by hooting the minutes and crowing the seconds. Attributed to English horologist James Cox in the 1790s, the Peacock Clock was commissioned by minister Potemkin, more renowned for erecting village façades with nothing behind them to impress his lover, Tsarina Catherine, on her progress through rural Russia.

In Room 208 I make an early discovery in my European exploration, an anonymous work by a 15th-century Florentine painter that shows the baby Jesus with the whole world in his hands, an orb with Asia, Africa and – this is not a misspelling – Europia. I am intrigued by the suggestion of Utopia here, the notion that Europe – whatever else it may be – is an ideal called Europia to which the real-world entity only occasionally corresponds.

**22 km**

Inescapable on the way back to my hostel, lo and behold, Ivan, at his post in front of the Nevsky Palace. 'The quality of mercy is not strained,' he begins to recite, leaving me tongue-tied and strangely moved, as Portia's speech from *The Merchant of Venice* is one that my 87-year-old father knows by heart. Clearly, Ivan is beefing up his emigration pitch. I smile appreciation and make a mental note: if ever Australia is desperately short of peasant-minded doormen who can quote Shakespeare, he will go to the head of the queue.

**40 km**

Five days, 8 km a day (it would have been less but this city's underground railway, with no lifts down from street level, is off limits to wheelchair users). Tomorrow morning I head north to the boondocks.

It's 10 pm now, and I hope to slink back to my hostel for a few hours' sleep. Easy does it, if I can just avoid the drunks who swig from the bottle as they sway down the pavements on autopilot.

Uh-oh, there's Ivan under the Nevsky's awning, beckoning. No escape.

Patiently I listen as he tells me of his son, now nineteen, who was left deformed by an injury sustained during his birth. He says he just wanted to tell me one thing. 'I admire you. You do not' – and here he declaims in a manner worthy of Hamlet – 'surrender' – his arm is outstretched, statue-like – 'to despair'. How humbling. If only he knew …

I could have told him quite a lot about succumbing to Despair but compliments come along rarely enough in life that no good purpose is served by showing those kind enough to offer them how undeserved they are. Those days were a different time, and too different a place in my life, to make it any part of Ivan's, and these days I hardly ever think of the time before and immediately after that fundamental divide in my life.

Still, the night you try to kill yourself is not one you're likely to forget. Nor is the state of mind that drove you to the brink of self-annihilation.

But how could I hope to convey the devastating damage to the certainties of everyday life wrought by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on those working in 'the next emirate down', Bahrain, in the incandescent summer of 1990? How could I expect Ivan to comprehend the fear of that fight, and the pointlessness of flight when faced with a looming military threat just over the horizon?

To understand that, he would need a power of imagination to sense what it might be like to feel trapped and alone in the workplace but find no refuge at home from the menace abroad.

On the evening of August 19, the fuse to my suicide attempt was lit. Could Ivan, or anyone, appreciate why amid the disintegration of an entire society I snapped, and ran down the street yelling that this was the end of the world? Certainly he could understand why a police van would pick me up and its officers lock me up overnight – and even, perhaps with a shudder of horror, pity my reduced state, petrified and under near constant surveillance, in a Bahraini asylum for the next ten days where I was questioned, analysed and sedated, diagnosed 'borderline manic depressive', stabilised and at last released – not back to work but shipped home, a certified failure.

My decision to discard the lithium once out of any obvious external danger was logical enough, but no one apart from 'the wretched of the earth' can truly know the humiliating shame and naked dread that crippled my being as the ensuing months brought not recovery but a dousing of all the lights of hope, one by one.

You can't say I didn't put up a resistance. Whatever a 'nervous wreck' can do to restore himself to himself I did: seeking out psychiatric advice, the benefits of aromatherapy, relaxation and all manner of other cures for insomnia. When the fight had gone out of me, I turned to flight, quite literally. Year's end found me again in London, where I had last tasted happiness before the crash. But now it was a capital of desolation, bereft of work and hope alike. That round-the-world ticket from Melbourne permitted me to go in only one direction, from the east towards the setting sun. I could only flee so far.

Everywhere I travelled in thrall to my principal enemy, Despair. Could a friend have helped? No way I could think of. Some agonies are so private they cannot be shared, the loss of one's sanity above all.

Despair, to which Ivan does not see me surrendering now, had me comprehensively conquered then. I bowed my head to the counsel of Despair, 'Don't spread your Hell to others, you'll only drag them down'. Yet not until I arrived back in Melbourne at the end of February 1991 – after a brief unavailing stopover in Vancouver – did I realise for a certainty that I'd come home to die.

Exits there are aplenty. I might have found another had I not been staying with an old journalistic colleague and her friends in an East Melbourne mansion block and they not all gone out for the evening. I might have spied another road to extinction if so many of them, troubled souls, hadn't left a pharmacopoeia's worth of tablets on their various bedside tables.

Even after the mind has surrendered to Despair, dear Ivan, let me assure you, every sinew of the body strains against oblivion. Nevertheless, I might have called off that deed if one of my fellow guests had come back early. But my animal need to stop this interminable pain found a path through these converging factors, and in a trice the only possible thing I must do was as obvious as the night

that follows day. In the quietest spell of a warm March night, after hours of restless pacing, I sat imperturbably still on a window sill, four floors up, steadied myself featherlight against the frame, and gently let go …

The thud as my body hit 15 metres below was heard by the friend whose hospitality I was grievously abusing, and who had arrived home just minutes before. Seven months in the world-class Austin Hospital set me back on the road to happiness, which for curious old me requires journeys such as the 2007 crossing of Europe that I have interrupted for your benefit – leaving Ivan at his revolving door.

Today strangers who blurt out, 'What happened to you?' almost never get a straight answer, because these days I won't waste my breath. But Ivan is far more perceptive than they. Language permitting, I tell myself, I might have disowned his compliment with an outpouring of revelations. Even that would have been a waste of breath, though, since a perfectly adequate response to his tribute 'You do not surrender to despair' would have been: No, Ivan, I most certainly don't. I live with the consequences of doing so once.

**42 km**

More than 440 km north-east of what has long been Russia's window on the world lies Petrozavodsk, the forgotten Petropolis, in the expanses of Karelia or, less grandly, the backwoods that Russians memorably term the *peripheria*.

Distance is not all that separates glitzy, go-getting Petersburg from Petrozavodsk – Peter's Factory, so called because the Great one founded it to make armaments for the Great Northern War he was bent on prosecuting against those not-yet-peace-loving Swedes.

An overnight train service links the two, saving me the cost of a night's lodgings. The fact that St Petersburg's Ladozhsky Station has been newly refurbished doesn't raise any expectation that it will have trains to match. Just as well, since it doesn't. But, to my mild surprise, given the carriages' Soviet-era vintage, an external hydraulic ramp is on the platform ready to winch me up onto night train No. 658. The *provodnik* (carriage attendant) – who remains a staple of long-distance Russian train travel, supplying everything from advice