

Eastern Horizons

Hitchhiking the Silk Road

Levison Wood


HODDER

Also by Levison Wood

Walking the Nile
Walking the Himalayas
Walking the Americas

About the Author

Levison Wood is an award-winning author, explorer and photographer who specialises in documenting people and cultures in remote regions and post-conflict zones. His work has taken him around the world leading expeditions on five continents and he is an elected fellow of both the Royal Geographical Society and the Explorers Club.

Levison's second book, *Walking the Himalayas*, was voted Adventure Travel Book of the Year at the Edward Stanford Travel Writing Awards and his other books, *Walking the Nile* and *Walking the Americas*, were both Sunday Times bestsellers. He has presented several critically acclaimed documentaries including *From Russia to Iran: Crossing the Wild Frontier* where he re-traced part of his Silk Road adventures in a four-part series for Channel 4.

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For my parents, who had no idea where I was most of the time

In memory of Arthur Conolly



NOTTINGHAM

North Sea

Baltic

ST. PETERSBURG

NARVA

TALLINN

MOSCOW

SZEPIETOWO

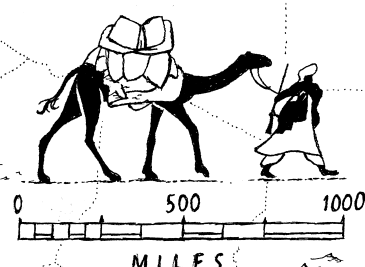
PRAGUE

CALAIS

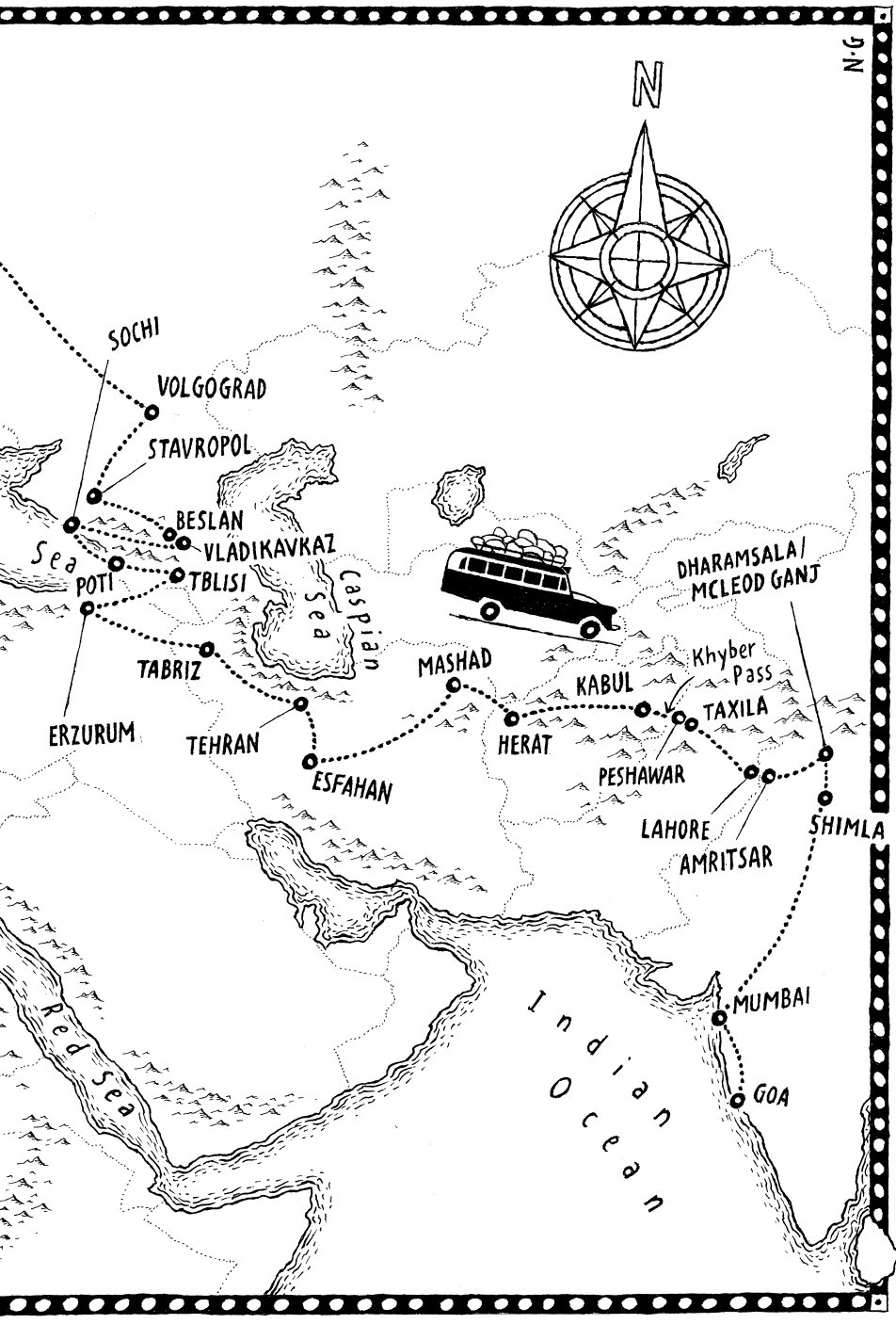
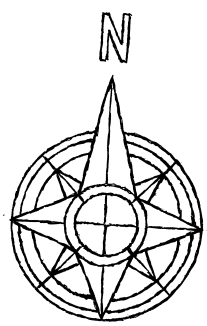
NUREMBURG

Black

Mediterranean Sea



MILES



Author's note

This is an account of a journey taken at the age of twenty-two, fresh out of university with the dregs of a student loan. I set off on a trek that, unbeknown at the time, was to become a defining point of reference for perhaps all my subsequent expeditions.

The year 2004 was a seminal one in my own life, and one of great social upheaval and change on the fringes of Europe, in Russia, and along the countries of the old Silk Road. However, this book does not purport to present a geo-political narrative, or indeed a comprehensive history of the ancient overland routes to the Indian subcontinent. Nor does it seek to analyse the complexities of Western foreign policy in the region, or the inter-tribal conflicts that have marred the paths of high Asia for centuries. There are other books that already do that very well. This is simply an account of my own youthful wanderings in a general easterly direction – albeit with a sprinkling of the kind of anecdotal history that interested me at the time.

The book was written over a two-year period after I left the army in 2010, some six years after the events had occurred. It was my first attempt at writing. It relies for the most part on my journals and notes kept at the time. The manuscript lay dormant for a subsequent six years until I was fortunate enough to retrace a part of my earlier adventures for a television documentary and it seemed an appropriate time to dust off the diaries.

EASTERN HORIZONS

The text itself is largely unchanged, therefore I should probably apologise for the perambulating style and literary immaturity of the narrative. But, rather than change it, I have chosen to keep it as it is and retain the essence of the memory. Because for me, that is what travel is all about: good memories – whichever direction they take you.

I travel not to go anywhere, but to go. I travel for travel's sake. The great affair is to move . . . to come down off this featherbed of civilisation and find the globe granite underfoot and strewn with cutting flints . . . [It] is no great industry, but it is one that serves to occupy and compose the mind. And when the present is so exacting, who can annoy himself about the future?

Robert Louis Stevenson, *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*, 1878

Tramps Abroad

Blackened lorries trundled by, interrupting the silence of a September Sunday morning. To the west, endless fields rolled away like a patchwork quilt of green and brown. In the east, a Lincolnshire town was just about visible. Roofs pointed out from the tall hedgerow, and, in the distance, the spire of a church gave away that this was rural England. I already saw in my imagination the onion domes of Moscow, the jagged peaks of Georgia, the eternal deserts and minarets of Persia and the golden palaces of India.

I had a combination of hope and dread in anticipation of continuing my journey from where I had broken it off. By now it was nearing the start of autumn and already cold gusts of wind were blowing through the streets – reddening leaves were starting to take on a crisper appearance, marking the end of a fine summer. Six weeks had passed since I turned back from the Baltic Sea, embarrassed and chastened, and although I had kept myself busy chasing around the embassies, earning a little money, and generally avoiding having to explain myself, I was getting restless now and knew it was time to get back on the road. I'd gone to see Jon and explain myself at having retreated from the expedition, but my worries had been in vain.

I watched as Jon's boots pounded up and down, transfixed by the gentle monotony. He had taken the lead and was now a few

paces in front. Jon was the same age as me, twenty-two. He had finished his placement and recently moved to London, where he had been offered work with a big company starting in the New Year. He seemed happy to tag along – after all, Russia had been his idea. He hadn't given me too much hassle about not making it further than Estonia and, in fact, told me himself that he was glad we'd be starting again, this time together.

Winfield had already travelled quite a bit in Europe and across the United States and despite his nonchalant demeanour, he was quite capable of looking after himself. He was interesting and well read; a large part of his rucksack (which bounced in front of me with each of his springing steps) was filled with an unabridged volume of *War and Peace*, which he aimed to finish by the end of the trip. I was glad not to be setting off alone again.

High above, I noticed the white vapour trail from an aeroplane, cutting through the clouds. Back on earth, cows munched lazily on the far side of the hedge; their tails swatting away invisible flies. A life of ignorant contentment. I looked down as torn sheets of a newspaper danced in the wake of another truck and one of them flapped a while, caught around Jon's leg. 'NHS in crisis,' warned the muddy rag. 'Blair plans cabinet reshuffle as minister quits,' announced page four. 'Pensioners march on Westminster,' proclaimed the headline.

For ten million commuters, something was always going on in London. There was enough mild scandal and drama to fill the newspapers, but to the eyes of a graduate with no money and no job it all appeared rather tame. All I seemed to be able to think about was the unfolding excitement abroad. *Abroad*. Outside of the confines of western civilisation, that was where the real drama was. These were interesting times.

Iraq took centre stage. Despite the military successes of the previous year, it looked like it was going to turn nasty after all. Various insurgent groups had begun to rise up against the allied occupation in the struggle for power following the toppling of the *Ba'athist* regime. Saddam Hussein had recently been captured down a hole in Tikrit and was awaiting trial. Osama bin Laden was still at large somewhere in the mountains of Afghanistan or Pakistan.

Violence seemed to be on the increase and that year saw an unprecedented rise in the use of suicide bombers across the whole region and even in Europe: Madrid became the victim of an al-Qaeda attack, when a bomb exploded on one of its trains, and Spain quickly withdrew its troops from Iraq after the world's most wanted man offered peace to those countries that capitulated. In Britain, the USA and Canada, there were a series of outrages at so-called prisoner abuse in Iraqi jails, culminating in some high-profile investigations and even military trials. Moreover, the UN had declared the war illegal and Blair's Britain had become embarrassed.

Closer to home, Eastern Europe was gaining a foothold in the new world order as NATO expanded to include seven new countries and the EU also admitted ten new member states from former Soviet territories, much to the annoyance of Vladimir Putin. Russia was further upset after a series of bombings across the country, proving that the rebellion in Chechnya was still not over. Afghanistan, on the other hand, with its medieval warlords, had largely gone from people's minds since the destruction of the Taliban in 2002.

I was eager to see something of the state of affairs that we read so much about; this turbulent East, with its bombings and uprisings, its assassinations and jihads.

Jon and I hadn't said a word in over half an hour. A cattle bridge loomed overhead; its underbelly, daubed in vulgar graffiti, was the only entertainment. The road seemed to go on forever. Things weren't promising – in over an hour, nobody had stopped to pick us up. Still, my thoughts were of nothing but utter freedom and eager anticipation. Trucks and coaches rumbled past. Jon suddenly chuckled to himself – he did that often. I knew that despite his silent protests, he felt the same as me. Looking out over the gusty fields to the east, a flock of geese hurriedly worked their way across the sky and I felt a shiver of excitement. We were going to India.

I had promised myself – and Jon – that things would be different. This time I, or we, would make it. The visas had eventually come through. Russia, Iran, Pakistan, they were all there: big, vulgar stamps that took up a page each.

'I'll come to Georgia or Turkey, maybe a bit further, but there's no way I'm going anywhere near Iran,' Jon said, as another lorry sprayed the road with brown sludge. Winfield was an avid traveller, but had the added virtue of common sense as well.

'All right, we'll see.' I thought that once he was on the road, I'd persuade him to forget about his job and come all the way to the Himalayas.

'And anyway, at this rate we won't even get as far as France,' he said with a sardonic smirk, as we plodded along the hard shoulder. It was a Sunday and there wasn't much traffic.

We'd started the journey that morning, waking up from a boozy slumber on someone's couch in a student flat. I remember wincing at the time; it was ten-thirty and we were supposed to be catching a flight from Stansted airport the following morning. We'd banked on hitchhiking down the east coast of Britain that day. Alex, my housemate from university, had offered

to drop us off on the dual carriageway somewhere near to Grantham.

‘Try not to get yourself on Al Jazeera,’ Alex said with a grin. For a second, I imagined a newsreel of us being captured by Islamic militants and paraded on the Qatar news channel. ‘You lucky bastards,’ he added, evidently jealous. Alex was never averse to a spot of danger and I thought back to the year before, when he and I had hitchhiked home from Cairo, accidentally passing through Iraq in the middle of the war.

‘We’ll try not to,’ I grinned back, before reminding him of our usual arrangement.

‘Remember, keep your phone on. If we get in the shit – you’ll be the one bailing us out. You know the score, if you don’t hear from us within five days after entering anywhere dodgy, then get on the blower to the Foreign Office. We’ll keep you posted.’

We waved goodbye to Alex and Jon peered down at the passing trucks as they flew underneath the concrete bridge. I looked into the distance as the road disappeared over the horizon to the south, flanked by English countryside in all its glory.

‘Shall we?’

Jon nodded and we started to walk down the slip road. It was an odd way to begin a journey. We were hitchhiking down a motorway to an airport so we could fly back to Eastern Europe, all because I’d had to turn back from there a few weeks before. It was pedantic, but I was adamant we’d pick up the trail properly where I had left it, in Estonia – and Winfield didn’t seem to mind.

Cars and lorries flew by, dangerously close, honking their horns indignantly. I remembered how the French police had almost arrested me on a motorway in Champagne for vagrancy and that the best thing to do was to find a service station and wait for a lift there.

After a few miles, we came across a desolate truck stop near to the village of Stretton. It was a bleak, prefabricated outpost, with a miserable old woman who looked like a wartime dinner lady. Inside the tiny café, on plastic white chairs, fat lorry drivers spilled their midribs over the armrests and fought to understand each other's regional dialects.

This is where it starts, in this little service station, I thought. Looking east, ten thousand miles of road would lead us to India. It seemed an insurmountable distance. It was hard to imagine how this wretched motorway would take us beyond the furthest reaches of Europe and on to the Silk Road. Visions of camel trains and date palms came to mind. Then, a horn blared and quickly faded as it sped past, snapping me quickly back to reality. All of that, of course, was a long way off. First of all, we needed a lift.

Some people think that hitchhiking is dangerous, or mad, or stupid. They might be right, but actually, when you think about it, hitching is no more dangerous than taking a taxi, insomuch as you are accepting a lift from a perfect stranger. In the past, I had hitchhiked all around England, in Southern Africa, Australia and the Middle East, and everywhere I went people had stopped and offered their help – eventually.

Standing at the edge of the car park next to a motorway, keeping an eye on the truck drivers inside, hoping that one would leave soon, it took a while to forget about the embarrassment at being so vulnerable and at the mercy of other people's pity. Hitchhiking, I had long understood, is not for the proud.

Cars passed by at a hundred miles per hour. I sometimes caught a glimpse of the drivers as they shot past. They always seemed to have the same aloof stare, looking intently at the road ahead, even though I know they always saw me. They didn't

want the unpleasant feeling of meeting my gaze and then having to experience a pang of guilt afterwards. For them it was better to concentrate on the central reservation, accidentally glancing away as they passed by, deluding themselves into ignorance and inventing an excuse for why they didn't stop.

I was going too fast, there's no way I could have stopped in time . . . probably would have caused an accident or something. There's nowhere to stop, anyway. No room in the car. I'm only going down the road . . . and besides, he's probably a maniac murderer or a thief or a Greenpeace activist . . .

Of course, by the time all this has passed through the motorist's head, the hitchhiker is pleasantly out of view and he can forget all about it. The guilt rarely lasts long, and he is certain *someone else* will pick him up anyway.

Generally, if people give you a lift, they either feel sorry for you or have been in the same situation themselves. I've been picked up by the most unlikely people: a motorist whose car was completely full of furniture, but nevertheless stopped and rearranged it all, and in Australia, a mother who had her three children in the back of the car – at night! And people have driven miles out of their way to take me to my destination.

After ten minutes, a small red Ford Fiesta pulled over in the car park next to where we were loitering and its driver peered out of the window.

'Where are you fellows off to?'

He was about fifty and wore a smart, brown woollen suit. Thin grey hair was combed over a balding scalp and wispy eyebrows jerked erratically from a weathered forehead. His eyes were piercingly blue. He barked out of the window in a regal accent with the air of a university professor: 'Well? Don't just stand there – get in!'

Jon and I looked at each other for a second before rushing to cram our bags into the boot.

‘I always pick up hitchhikers,’ said the man. ‘I was one myself many years ago. So, where are you going?’

‘Anywhere so long as it’s south. We want to get to Stansted,’ said Winfield.

‘Where are you going? You look like a pair of tramps, they won’t let you in any nightclubs on the Costa del Sol looking like that.’

‘Estonia,’ I told him. ‘Then we’re hitching to India.’

‘*India*,’ he repeated dreamily. Furry white eyebrows twitched up and down in a way that betrayed his admiration.

‘Bugger me. Well, I suppose I shall have to take you to Stansted then. You’ve got a long journey ahead of you.’

We squeezed into the tiny motor, grateful for such a stroke of luck, but at the same time a little suspicious. I looked around the cramped car as we sped off down the motorway. Jon and I were both on the back seat, taking second place to a large pile of brown envelopes and packages sealed roughly with shiny parcel tape. The driver must have noticed me eyeing his cargo.

‘Hunter,’ he said.

‘Excuse me?’ Jon replied.

‘My name is Rogers – Hunter Rogers. And who are you two?’

We introduced ourselves to the eccentric driver. I could see that Winfield was as intrigued as I was. Here was this perfect aristocrat in a three-piece tweed outfit reduced to driving a clapped-out Ford Fiesta filled with unmarked packages.

‘Went across Asia myself in the sixties. A lot safer then, though, of course.’ He pondered ruefully before continuing, ‘Never been to Moscow, though. I tell you what. In exchange for me taking

you to the airport, you must send me a postcard when you get there.'

'Fair enough,' said Jon. 'What would you like? Red Square? The Kremlin?'

'No,' Hunter bellowed, raising a finger like an ancient philosopher. 'I want that beastly Lenin's corpse.'

Jon looked at me from the corner of his eye and flashed a smile. 'Certainly.'

About halfway down the motorway, at another dismal truck stop, Hunter insisted on buying us 'high tea'. Surrounded by hairy lorry drivers in dirty white vests reading crumpled copies of the *News of the World*, we sipped on polystyrene cups full of a grey, milky brew. Hunter barely seemed to notice them. I couldn't help but wonder what misfortune had befallen this relic of a bygone age.

'I used to travel a lot in my youth. All over,' Hunter said thoughtfully. He sat like a proud old artist and I tried to imagine him as a young man exploring the world; sketching, seducing, thinking. He was quintessentially English, but even a stiff upper lip couldn't quite disguise his melancholy.

'And now I drive around delivering parcels. That's what happens in life, you'll find out one day.' It was a depressing thought.

We arrived at the airport at dusk. Hunter had driven fifty miles out of his way and despite evidently being quite odd, his generosity went a long way in reminding me of the joy of hitchhiking. We took our intriguing driver's address and promised him his picture postcard of Lenin's stuffed cadaver.



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