FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

The Shaman's Coat: A Native History of Siberia
Anna Reid
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During the middle of the nineteenth century, communication between eastern Russia and its claims in westernmost Siberia was slow; in fact, “the quickest way to get from Petersburg to Kamchatka was by taking a ship across the Atlantic to New York, a train across America, and a second ship across the Pacific.”

The author mixes such interesting tidbits among personal observations and to-the-point interviews from her recent travels across Siberia to discover more about the native peoples. She shines a light on the area that most know only as a cold, barren, and infamously forbidden region where criminals were once sent.

Reid holds a master’s degree in Russian history and reform economics from London’s School of Slavonic and East European Studies. She was the Kiev correspondent for the Economist and the Daily Telegraph from 1993 to 1995. Her first book, *Borderland: A Journey through the History of the Ukraine*, was published to wide acclaim in 1997. Here, she intersperses the usually bloody history of Russia’s clashes with the now-called “Small-Numbered People” (at least eight distinct groups) with descriptive historical documentation from earlier adventurers and explorers. For example, she cites American journalist George Kennan’s meeting in the late 1880s with the Khamba Lama, the head of the Buryat church. Kennan was amazed to discover that his host had never heard of America and also believed the world to be flat.

A recurring theme throughout is shamanism, an ancient religious belief involving good and evil spirits who work through a medium called a shaman. Reid’s quest is to find out if the practice—and any of the native cultures—still truly exist.

She samples various towns on her westward journey, meeting women like Natasha, a twenty-one-year-old graduate student originally from the far northeastern tundra. “When the military look at my passport,” says Natasha, “they can’t believe it. They think that if you’re from the north you’ve got slitty eyes, that you live in a tent making friends with bears.”

While the author’s words paint a keen visual picture, she occasionally comes across as unintentionally mean-spirited. An especially interesting passage is the introduction to Sakhalin

Island and how the British belatedly and dishearteningly discovered during the Crimean War that the land was not, as believed, a peninsula.

At the conclusion of her travels she spots a whale. “Here, at last,” she writes, “was a creature thoroughly enjoying itself and at home, neither dying of drink nor dreaming of life anywhere but Siberia.”

Robin Farrell Edmunds