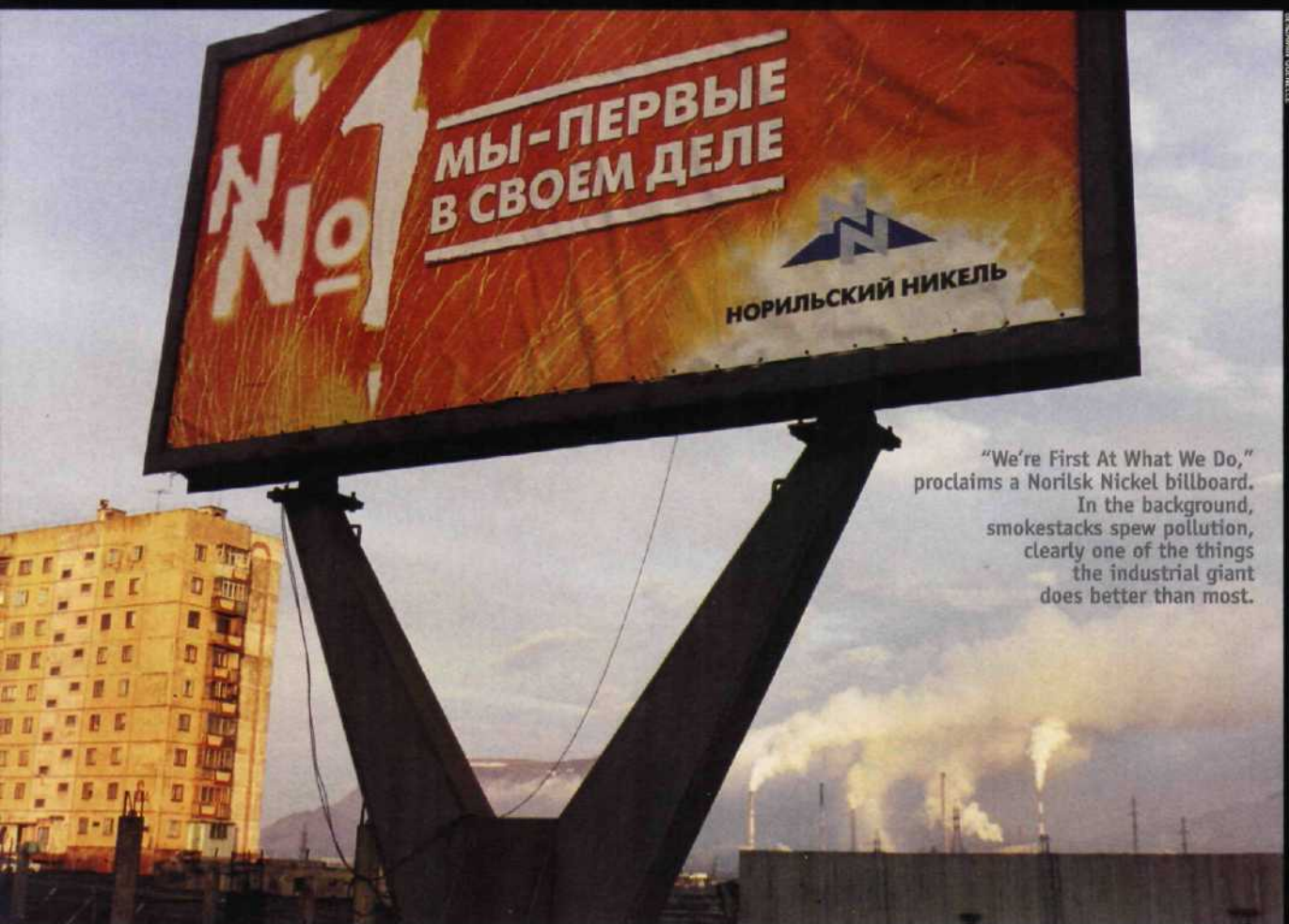


The City Which

By Eric Helque



"We're First At What We Do," proclaims a Norilsk Nickel billboard. In the background, smokestacks spew pollution, clearly one of the things the industrial giant does better than most.

In the center of Norilsk, on a wall next to the entrance to City Hall, a huge, year-old poster proudly commemorates the 50th anniversary of the city's official founding: "Norilsk is 50. And it is just a beginning."

The urge to congratulate this northern city on its birthday wheezes away when you look around, gulping in the city's hopelessly polluted air. Instead, you really feel like asking: "Norilsk, how much longer can this go on?"

Norilsk is a crumbling temple created by long-vanished high priests in one of Earth's most inhospitable places, intended for the worship of a terribly exacting god. Norilsk was only granted the status of city in 1953, but the Soviet State began building the town in 1939 in this lonely outpost – 217 miles north of the Polar Circle, in something like Siberia's Siberia. And, ever since the Soviet high priests vanished, the city

Should not Exist

has been drifting into a growing state of disrepair. The only reason it is still standing is that its god has not abandoned it. That god is nickel. And it is habitually worshiped not with clouds of incense, but with emissions of sulfur dioxide.

Nickel ore, along with other metals, was discovered soon after geological expeditions began here in the 1920s (a copper mine was dug here in the 1860s) and rapidly sparked an industrial boom. The ore was first mined and processed by a state-owned industrial complex, which in 1989 acquired its present name: Norilsk Nickel. In 1995, this huge company, which also has branches in other parts of Russia, was privatized and purchased by oligarch Vladimir Potanin (see *Russian Life*, Mar/Apr 2004). Norilsk Nickel currently accounts for over two percent of Russia's GDP.

Nickel is a rare metal essential for producing stainless steel and protective coatings applied to other metals. For that reason, it is widely used in the aircraft and space industries. Norilsk Nickel is the world's leading producer of nickel, and other precious metals like palladium (one-third of world output), platinum (one-fourth) and copper (one-fifth). Nickel and other metals are the only reason hundreds of thousands of people live in Norilsk. As everyone here will tell you, this place was not made for human habitation.

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feel freer. There is more solidarity between people. Yet even this enthusiast admitted there is something strangely unnatural about the city's existence. "Norilsk is a real life social experiment, because its people originally came from all over the former Soviet Union, to live in a place not intended for human beings," Tolstov said as he polished off a huge reindeer meat kebab in the restaurant where we were having dinner.

Norilsk (current population 230,000) is not built on an island, but you would be forgiven for thinking so. This is a place so remote from the rest of civilization that, when people go to another part of Russia, they say they are going "to the mainland." The nearest large city – Krasnoyarsk – is almost 1,000 miles away; Moscow is

over 4,000 miles distant. So the only way to get here is by plane, or, in summer, by boat from southern Siberia. It takes four hours to fly from Moscow to Norilsk. Add the four hours you lose *en route* (Norilsk is four hours ahead of the capital) and

it takes a good day to get here. If you sail here from Krasnoyarsk, it can take a week.

Yet distances are but a footnote to Norilsk's punishing climactic conditions. Temperatures can fall to -57° Celsius in winter. And winter lasts for nine months – from early September,

Norilsk.



REXUS/GETTY

Unlike many of this city's residents, Vladislav Tolstov, a burly TV journalist in his mid-30s sporting an untrimmed, greying beard, was born in Norilsk. And he loves his native city. Here, alone in the middle of a hostile environment and all but cut off from the rest of the world, Tolstov said, you