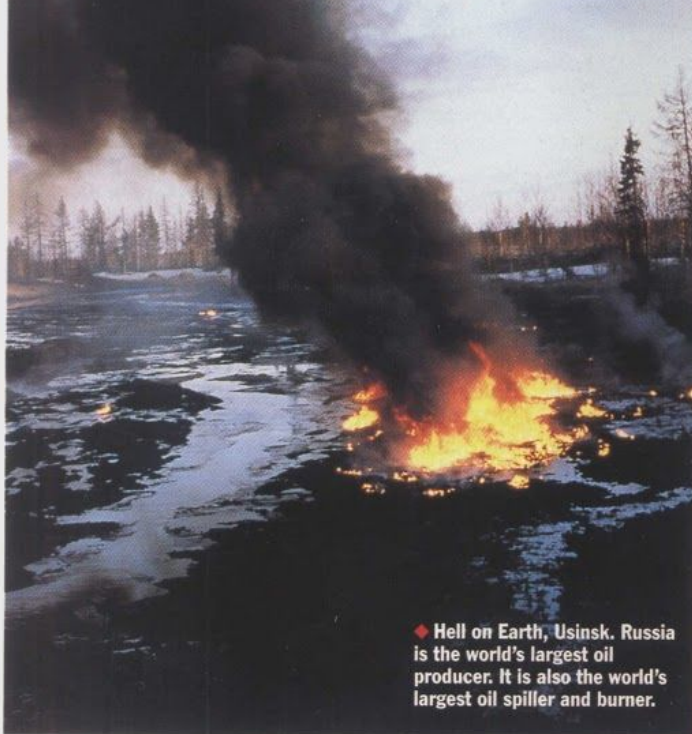


DIARY OF A BAD TRIP



◆ Hell on Earth, Usinsk. Russia is the world's largest oil producer. It is also the world's largest oil spiller and burner.

Pierre Gielzes/EPL

RUSSIA The Russians say it was about 4,000 tonnes of oil that leaked from a 46km pipeline in Usinsk over the course of last year. The World Bank says 100,000. US experts say 270,000. **Alex Horton**, investigating this spring for Greenpeace, just knows that it was a monstrous, ugly mess.

It was going to be another normal day in Usinsk. Up to our knees in mud and crude oil, breathing in burnt hydrocarbons, tossed about in suspensionless jeeps. But what we were enduring was little compared to what the locals and the environment have suffered over 30-odd years of oil exploitation. With an early spring

I found myself trapped in snow, with only an oil-clogged stream between me and a hell of burning trees.

thaw well under way, the extent of the disaster was rapidly becoming obvious.

We had just dispatched one of our team to Moscow with the first week's film documentation, when reports started coming in of a huge explosion in Ukhka, 300km to the south.

The Japanese thought it was a nuclear explosion, and the dollar fell. Then it was reported as a massive gas-pipeline blow-out, and the oil price rose in response to a possible threat to European gas supplies. We needed the facts.

Our day turned upside-down, and I found myself boarding another dreaded Aeroflot flight. That evening, on arrival at the site, we found a huge crater where the gas-pipe had been, and the surrounding forest seared and stunted – more proof, if any were still needed, that the Russian oil

and gas infrastructure is in an appalling state.

The situation in Ukhka was soon under control, but we were acutely aware that the one north of Usinsk was not. I was half-relieved to hear that there were no seats available on the next Aeroflot flight back north and that we would have to charter a plane. Much safer, I thought – right up until I set eyes on the beast. Her rotor blades drooped forlornly towards the tarmac, her rivet-pimpled hide was a jaundiced yellow and I could just make out the stencilled letters under the heavy black streaks burnt on the fuselage: Aeroflot.

Boarding reluctantly, I settled down to a two-hour vigil while the 'Yellow Peril' droned through the sky. I was rewarded with stunning scenes of forest, tundra and marshland, a rare treat on this low-level flight. To the east, the Ural mountains rose proud and pink in the evening sunlight, while the great Pechora river coiled west and north to the Barents Sea. But delight soon turned to dismay as I spotted flocks of birds migrating north towards their now-blighted spring breeding grounds.

We lurched down the airstrip at Usinsk intact. Leaving the desolate, grey-block buildings of the oil town behind, we headed north in the jeep, and drove through a beautiful silver-birch landscape marred by routinely spilled crude oil, the sulphurous stench of it in the air.

A while later, a column of smoke lured us off the main road – burning was the telltale sign of a recent spill. It wasn't long before our jeep became bogged down and we were forced to approach on foot. I found myself trapped up to my knees in snow, heatwaves buffeting off the rest of me, with only an oil-clogged stream between me and a hell of burning trees.

I stood and watched the slowly smouldering trees pouring off more and more white smoke until they blossomed into fiery flame, billowing black into the blue Arctic sky. An oil-company car lurked at the periphery of the scene, its occupants safely cocooned behind tinted windows.

Apparently, yet another containment dam had broken, releasing a gush of oil down towards the Kolva River. Setting it alight had been the quickest, cheapest solution, despite spreading the problem and leaving virtual tarmac behind.

Later, we weren't surprised to hear that the oil workers had been ordered not to burn spills while the international press and

Greenpeace were in town. And after we arrived the horizon to the north began to clear of black clouds.

Towards the end of our three-and-a-half-week stay, I was almost looking forward to getting back on Aeroflot. The situation seemed so hopeless: a grossly inadequate clean-up of one of the world's largest oil spills, new spills occurring, and ever more western oil companies, including British Gas and Conoco, moving in, bringing superior technology to extract the oil, only to pour it down a pipeline that leaks like a sieve.

Our final journey, on VE day, was to Khata-Yaga, one of the worst spill sites, the road to which had recently become passable. An hour's bumpy ride north found us on an unfamiliar track. Great clods of delicate tundra mosses and lichens lay dumped on uprooted and mangled silver birches by the side of the road.

As we slowed to cross a small bridge, we saw the first signs. The creek we were crossing was smothered in thick, black crude. Two useless dams had been built, but they could never keep back the bulk of the oil that had already escaped downstream with the thaw.

I ventured down to the stream, heavy black droplets soaking into my jacket from the trees and bushes on the banks – the oil level had been as high as my shoulder. Foot-square chunks of cold crude littered the banks and were piled up in the bends like blocks of poisonous black butter, obscene against the pristine white of the lingering snow.

Further up the road, we found the huge, blue-black oil lakes and the barren, burnt plain that had once been forest. A lone security guard ordered us away, but we finished our documentation before obliging, compiling the evidence to show to those who believe an oil spill of this magnitude can be cleaned up. It cannot.

The following day we were without our driver. He'd been hauled in for questioning by the FSK, formerly the KGB.

On our last morning, we met with Komineft, the owners of the pipeline. In a blatant denial of the reality of acres of fragile tundra drenched in oil, they maintained that the spill was not a major one.

Two hours later, as we boarded our final Aeroflot flight, it wasn't the usual fear that almost sent me back down the gangway. It was the towering black column of smoke to the north. They were burning again.

Just another normal day in Usinsk.