Russia seems to be remarkably short of puncture patches. The biggest problems are often simple punctures. On a village lathe, a fractured frame is re-welded (several times), but the biggest problems are often simple punctures. Parts for a broken wheel hub are turned out on a village lathe, a fractured frame is re-welded (several times), but the biggest problems are often simple punctures. Russia seems to be remarkably short of puncture patches.

Finding the road can be equally problematic: it appears and disappears, rarely relates to maps and sometimes fades completely.

There’s even crime. The authors write their way across the continent relay fashion. Tim takes you from Bratsk to Ulan Ude, meeting along the way, Vladimir, a local member of the Bratva or ‘brotherhood’, the Russian version of the Mafia. At least we assume he’s a Bratva associate, since he’s got a fancy car and clearly too much money for his own good. Never mind, he lavishes them with care and attention (and a crate of beer when he deposits them in a Bratsk sauna): ‘we didn’t pretend to understand the system and knew that we were no targets of crime.’

Well, that’s not quite so. Only a few chapters earlier, Tim tells us in the Kirov to Ekaterinburg chapter that, in Perm, they were befriended by a group of young Russians who turned out to be local druggies and did the old take-you-to-the-ATM-with-threats trick to relieve them of 500 roubles.

As all travellers who manage to find their way to weird places will confirm, however, anyone with a title or a uniform is likely to be just as big a problem as petty criminals. Despite visas and permits, they are not allowed to ride from Russia into Mongolia. Solution? Make a long backtrack, get on the train, cross the border then disembark. The same problem presents itself when they approach China and, of course, there’s a similar solution. ‘Well, don’t worry about the embassy too much,’ a lanky European advises them, ‘don’t take them so seriously.’

Not only are they not allowed to ride across the border, they are told that they’re not allowed to ride their bikes in China at all. But, in reality, there are lots of things in China that nobody is at all certain about, including the prospect of foreigners crossing the country by bicycle. Problems arise when they cruise into Houqi, which is off limits to foreigners. They are arrested and have to sign a confession and pay a fine. Fortunately, a local school teacher, roped in to act as translator, goes in to bat for them. ‘After a lot of haggling, and a point at which I thought she was about to sit on the man’s lap and start kissing him, we agreed on an awful 600 Yuan.’ Even the fines can be bargained down, although this one ‘still amounted to US$75’. Put on the train out of Houqi, they escape at the first stop and pedal on.

All through their fourteen-month odyssey, there are others, such as Xiao Wei, the charming Houqi teacher, who prove over and again that travel is far more about people than places. Repeatedly, they are offered accommodation, meals, vodka and endless helping hands. It’s the Russian babushkas for whom they reserve a special affection. A Russian grandmother, it appears, simply cannot see two lads looking tired and hungry without taking them in and feeding them. Baba Galya, a babushka with whom they stay for whom they reserve a special affection. A Russian grandmother, it appears, simply cannot see two lads looking tired and hungry without taking them in and feeding them. Baba Galya, a babushka with whom they stay...

Of course, their bikes break down from time to time and require attention; parts for a broken wheel hub are turned out on a village lathe, a fractured frame is re-welded (several times), but the biggest problems are often simple punctures. Russia seems to be remarkably short of puncture patches.