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## In 'Russian Chronicles,' Photography Achieves an Evolved Purpose on the Web

By KAREN A. FRENKEL **ETC**

**A** year ago, photography sites on the Web were scarce, about 30 in all, and it was exciting when a search yielded a new one. Now there are hundreds of such sites, ranging in subject from photojournalism to nature to sports, from infrared to stereoscopic technique, from archival images to those taken with digital cameras. And just last week, "24 Hours in Cyberspace" set out to document how the Internet has changed peoples' lives.

But many of these sites are merely static low-budget galleries filled with images created for paper. While browsing such sites can be a pleasant enough experience, they are by definition poor cousins. After all, people can look at paper photographs in the real world at much higher resolution and without having to wait for them to download.

"The last place I want to look at a photo is on a computer screen," says Gary Matoso, a photojournalist based in Paris with Contact Press Images whose work has appeared in Time, Newsweek, BusinessWeek and The New York Times. "There's got to be a reason to be looking at a photo on a computer."

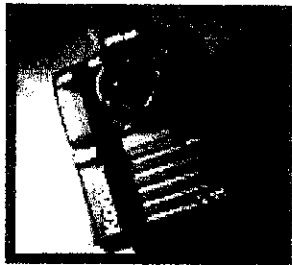
Gallery-type Web sites "don't involve me," Matoso said, "and I'm more interested than your average person." Such formats are useful electronic portfolios. Matoso concedes. "But that's not where I'm going to go to see photos. I'll go to books and magazines."



Intent on producing a site that used photography and involved a visitor as only the Web can, Matoso and



detailing a trans-Siberian trek from Vladivostok to St. Petersburg. The pair documented their odyssey at six levels, or tracks -- Daily Chronicles (their own diaries), Road Stories (their experiences in greater depth), In Their Words (Russians interviewed en route), an Atlas, Trip at a Glance, and e-mail between visitors to the Web site and the chroniclers themselves.



While on the road, Matoso and Dickey transmitted images shot with their digital camera, a Kodak 420 DCS, and files of their diaries back to Tripp Mikich, the project director, and Chuck Gathard, the site designer. The goal was "interactive and real-time storytelling," says Mikich. "Photography was a very strong and central part of what we wanted to do and at the same time only a part of it. We wanted to allow for a dialogue between the site

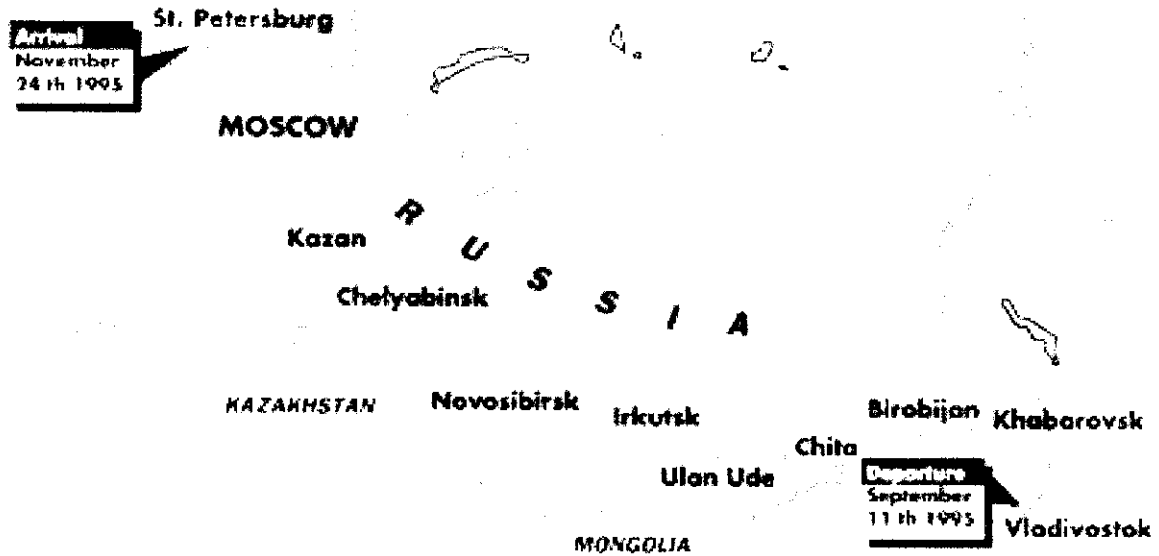
users, the people creating the material, and the subjects of the stories themselves."

Because site visitors could communicate with the chroniclers, a Russian national in Toronto, Karim Khamzin, asked Matoso and Dickey to visit his family in Irkutsk. Khamzin saw stills of his loved ones and heard his six-year-old son, Damir, ask him to bring home Legos. Khamzin's 13-year-old son, Artyum told his father he hoped that the rest of the family could soon join him in Canada. And in the segment on the Last Jews of Birobijan, site visitors heard singing voices in the sole remaining synagogue.

"What we did was more powerful than other sites," Matoso said, "because we created the project specifically for the Web and that distinguishes it. Other sites are repurposed, cut-and-paste journalism. Our goal was to create an experience that you could not get in a book or magazine."

Whereas the analogous TV spot or documentary experience might seem vicarious, in these instances "you can get beyond voyeurism," Mikich says, "because you communicate with the people behind the screen." And while the emphasis remained on still photography, he says, the Web "equalizes different components because you can present a variety of media -- audio, text, or video -- to best illustrate an interview or make a point."

It usually took a day or two to define a story, another day or two to produce and transmit it. Matoso sees the journals as a way of giving visitors to the site an intimate involvement in how various stories were discovered, pursued and executed. "It hooked people into the project and gave them a sense of being there and sense of traveling along with us," he says. And when faced with logistic or bureaucratic setbacks, a journal, he says, "alleviates pressure, in a sense, because if something is not going right, you can tell people what's happening and why."



Credit: FocalPoint f/8

In fact, says Fred Ritchin, an associate professor of Photography and Communication at New York University, the process of getting the story "is much more spectacular than any summation." Calling "The Russian Chronicles" a "kind of throwback to the serial structure in a newspaper," Ritchin says that the journals "involve the viewer with expectations of what will happen next."

"Usually news is the tip of the iceberg," Ritchin says. "In this case, you see the process and get inside of it. That's more interesting than selected images and highlight imagery because it gives context and a sense of evolution over time. If it had been printed in a weekly, you would have gotten six pages of a fait accompli."

Matoso says he felt hindered by the digital camera's size, which made it hard to be discrete, and by its limited focal length -- the equivalent of 40 mm lens. On the other hand, it allowed him and Dickey instantly to see what worked and what did not. They could reshoot before leaving a location, which would have been impossible had they sent film out for development or held onto it until the journey's end.

If the site has a flaw it lies in the dearth of navigational tools. For example, you can get from Daily Chronicles to the Atlas and from Daily Chronicles to Road Stories, but you can't jump directly from the words of Khabarisk residents to a map of their city, for example.

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sites from within the text because, MIKICH says, the team wanted to avoid "the classic surfing metaphor of losing track of where you are and being unable to get back." Instead, they will offer a single page with external links.

Mikich says that the team considers their site "unfortunately unique" and he bemoans the lack of support for such efforts by news organizations on the Web.



"I don't know of anyone doing this live material," he says. Even "24 Hours in Cyberspace," which had significant financial resources, produced what was basically a spot-news event. And although Microsoft Network is buying and publishing photo essay material on the Web, he says, almost all of it is based on existing photographic work.

Matso adds: "Until video and sound improve, photography is the most powerful visual element you can show on The Web, if it is used properly. Why are people going to want to look at photos on their screens? The Russian Chronicles is more than just photo journalistic. That's not why people came to the site."

He wants the site to be judged not as an exhibit, but as an online project created especially for a new medium.

*Karen Frenkel at [kfrenkel@nytimes.com](mailto:kfrenkel@nytimes.com) welcomes your comments and suggestions.*

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### **Related Sites**

Following are links to the external Web sites that are mentioned in or complement this article. These sites are not part of The New York Times on the Web, and The Times has no control over their content or availability. When you have finished visiting any of these sites, you will be able to return to this page by clicking on your Web browser's "Back" button or icon until this page reappears.

- **The Russian Chronicles** (the source of all images in this article except the picture of the digital camera)
- **Biographies** of "The Russian Chronicles" staff.
- **Home Page of F8**, the consortium of photographers and journalists that sponsored the Russian Chronicles and other projects that explore the potential of new digital and communications technologies on the Web.
- **Kodak Professional 420 DCS camera** (source of the photograph of the 420 DCS used in this article)
  
- Gille Peress' "**Farewell to Bosnia**," based on his book, a moving photo essay with a strong sense of authorship that approaches the poetic.
- **Digital Photography '95**, presented by the Peoria Art Guild and Bradley University, with artists' testimonials, comments of site visitors, a clip of the real gallery opening, and a list of other interesting sites.
- **Sky Bergman Home Page** -- an early Web portfolio and presentation.
- **Temporal Image** -- a web magazine with sophisticated design and graphics and photo features.
- **Photo Perspectives** Aaron Schindler's photo museum, one of the earliest photojournalism sites.
- **@tlas** Existing work from Catherine Karnow, Ed Kashi, Olivier Laude,