

# Stuck in Siberia

Trip to Russia to make documentary turned into more of an adventure than family had hoped for.

by JENNIFER MALONEY  
Staff Reporter

Kevin Vallely intended to make a documentary of his first outdoor adventure with his wife and new baby daughter, however the West Vancouver dad didn't expect their journey to the world's deepest ocean to be a serious drama.

"It was going to be a documentary of us paddling around the lake, not of us running from the law," he remarks nearly a year-and-a-half after the experience. "So it made for an equally interesting documentary, but not the one intended."

Experienced in rock climbing, paddling, and mountain biking, Vallely and his wife Nicky Hastings had toned down their adventurous life-style somewhat after their nine-month-old daughter, Caitlin, was born. Not wanting to lose their venturesome spirit entirely, however, they planned a six-week kayak trip to Baikal Lake in Siberia.

The 25 million-year-old lake holds one-fifth of the world's fresh water and is considered one of the world's most important natural wonders.

Aware of the nature of their trip was some-

what risky, the couple carefully crafted their travel plans.

"We felt, provided you prepare accordingly and do your homework before hand, it would be safe," Vallely explains. "We figured if it's safe for us it's safe for (Caitlin)."

The family researched exotic insects and were vaccinated accordingly. A satellite phone, life preservers and all the rigmarole that would ensure a safe paddling trip was packed. After a relaxing one-week train ride through Russia, they found their way to Ust-Barguzin, a tiny community in the depths of Siberia. Rich in its natural heritage, it was the family's final stop before they embarked on their kayaking journey.

But on the morning of their departure, a local park ranger informed the family there was a problem with their visas.

"He came back from the police office and said in poor English, 'Unfortunately, we have to keep your passports and you're under house arrest,'" Vallely recalls. "He said, 'You can't leave this community.'"

As it turned out the visas the family were issued were only valid for five days. In disbelief, Vallely scrutinized the hard-to-read Cyrillic script, only to find the dates on the visas had indeed expired. Then they learned the consequences of their bad luck. The family

faced a minimum fine of US\$2,000 each, jail, separation and deportation.

After contacting the Canadian Embassy they realized there was nothing their native officials could do to secure their fate. A local, who understood visa issues, discreetly discouraged the family from turning themselves over to authorities.

"What they told us to do was to try to resolve the visa issue where we were in Siberia," he says. "They said, 'If you try to go back and resolve this in Moscow, you'll be completely hosed.'"

While the family was coming to terms with the severity of their problem, a Baikal conservation group learned of their documentary. The group was lobbying to create a 2,000 kilometre-long trail around the wilderness community, which is under threat by pulp and paper industries.

"They were fascinated by what we were doing," Vallely says. "In a sense they were hoping we were going to promote their part of the world and maybe go through the ends to make sure it was protected. They really rallied around us."

The park ranger allowed the family to take their kayaking trip, provided they came back to the community.

"We were of the attitude, if we're in trouble we're in trouble. We might as well enjoy our trip," Vallely says.

When they returned the ranger instructed them to travel to Irkutsk, a nearby city, considered the Paris of Siberia, to resolve their visa issues. Upon arrival they were whisked away by affiliates of the conservation group, who harboured them in a huge concrete building.

"We were told we could not leave.

We had to stay and wait," Vallely says. "If we were stopped by any police officer, as tourists are often, we would have been arrested. We couldn't check in as required. It really began to feel somewhat like we were in jail."

Fortunately, a woman affiliated with the Baikal conservation group knew someone inside the passport office. She was able to get the family exit visas for a total of US\$1,000. In a country where the average medical doctor makes US\$80 per month, the bribe was close to a year's salary, Vallely explained.

Admittedly anxious about having her daughter in such circumstances, in the end Hastings said it was Caitlin who helped free the family and enabled them to record a

happy ending.

"People were suddenly very sympathetic to us when they saw we were travelling with a child," she says. "They bent over backwards for us."

Finally free, the family set out to a special island in the middle of the lake, which is considered one of the five poles of Shamanistic power, an ancient religion still practised today by some aboriginal people. Ghengis Khan is rumoured to be buried on the island.

There they were married in a traditional local ceremony. Under the barrage of drums with fire crackling, their daughter Caitlan was also blessed by a revered Shaman in full regalia.

Although the first adventure with their daughter was more adrenaline-filled than the family had anticipated, Vallely said the experience made for some heart-warming moments.

"Going through dilemmas tends to draw out the best in people," he reflects. "We saw a side of Russia we might not have seen had we not been in that state." ☺

The family's documentary, *Blessed in Baikal?*, screens at Centennial Theatre on Feb. 18 during the 9th annual Vancouver International Mountain Film Festival. For more details about the festival, visit [vimff.org](http://vimff.org)



**FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT** — (L to R): Nicky Hastings, Arianna, Kevin, and Caitlin Vallely. Their film, *Blessed by Baikal?*, is playing at this month's Vancouver International Mountain Film Festival.

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