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Sign up for the Russian snow patrol

Pushing the boundaries in the sport of heliskiing means not just going off piste but off the radar. Kamchatka is as remote as it gets, says Alf Alderson. There's hardly a soul in sight - just watch out for the bears and volcanoes

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Heliskiing in Kamchatka is about much more than simply scything down powder fields that may be more than two vertical kilometres from top to bottom. It's about an adventure-travel experience that starts from the moment you step out of your hotel door.

This vast peninsula in Russia's north-east corner is so remote that many of its mountains have yet to be officially named. And those that have been have generally acquired a mon-iker because they are big, high and volcanic - one of the peaks we skied, Mutnovski, last erupted only five years ago.

Indeed, Kamchatka is one of the most active volcanic regions on Earth. It is also home to the world's highest concentration of grizzly bears (which you may just spot while skiing, since the season runs into May, when the bears are awaking from

hibernation), and has some of the most awe-inspiring landscapes on the planet.

Even getting to the start of your first ski run is an unforgettable adventure. The coach journey to the heliport takes you from the grim streets of the city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, a throwback to Cold War days, when the majority of inhabitants were military personnel, and beneath the smoking summit of the 2,751-metre Avachinsky volcano. Don't worry if you fail to get a good view - you will be skiing down it later.

At the heliport, the smell of aviation fuel and the thump of the massive rotor blades of the distinctly utilitarian Mi-8 helicopters create an immediate frisson of excitement - their less than exemplary safety record has given them something of a reputation. We clamber into the back, taking the total complement of passengers to 12 heliskiers and boarders plus two guides, then settle back for the shuddering 30-minute flight into the heart of a World Heritage site that Unesco describes with studied under-statement as being of "exceptional natural beauty and diversity".

The minimalist interior of the craft makes Ryanair's offerings seem positively luxurious. One of the helicopters we travelled in was literally held together in places by string - very strong Russian string, I'm sure, but string nevertheless. The hard bench seats don't come with seat belts, and the fuselage is big enough to allow you to get up and wander around during the flight, and even open the porthole-style windows and stick your head out for a better view.

And it is some view - to the east, the cobalt-blue waters of the Pacific lap against a snowbound shoreline, while in every other direction range upon range of snow-shrouded mountains stretch out in a powder-blue haze beneath clear, sunny skies, banners of smoke and steam rising here and there where cracks in the crust extend all the way down to the earth's core.

Each run starts with skiers and boarders tumbling out of the chopper and cowering close to the ground in a blizzard of rotor-

whipped snow until the machine has clattered away; it will meet up with the group again in a valley some 2,000 metres below.

Once the snow has settled and silence returned to the mountains, it would be quite easy to stand and stare all day at the stunning panoramas on view, were it not for the magnificent sight directly below - an untracked powder field the size and length of which no ski resort in the world can match.

Once we are ready with our skis or boards, Marco, our mountain guide from Chamonix, tells us to wait while he goes on ahead. Having skied with guides before I am used to seeing them skid to a halt a few hundred metres down-slope, then hail the rest of the group to follow, but the terrain here is so vast that by the time Marco stops he is a tiny speck in the distance, and he has to call his colleague, Andriy, by radio to tell us to set off (Andriy will be bringing up the rear - this is not the place for anyone to get lost).

There then follow two minutes of floating through shin-deep powder, soft, light and deep and quite clearly the very elixir of life - how else to explain the wide grins and whoops of joy from every skier and boarder in the group?

But it is not just the snow that brings this feeling of utter exhilaration - it is also the vastness of the landscape, the absolute wilderness in which we are happily immersed and the knowledge that there is probably not another skier for several thousand miles in any direction.

We pull up beside Marco and then repeat the process several times over, until we are thoroughly exhausted, and thoroughly happy, and ready to rendezvous with the helicopter again.

Today, it is waiting for us in a valley where a small stream meanders aimlessly across a wide, snowy flood plain. But on other days we find it tucked beside steaming hot springs, where we can slide into the water and ease tired muscles at day's end; or, my favourite, on a pebbly beach which gives us the unique opportunity to ski to the sea and go skinny-dipping (very briefly) in 4C water.

On our first day in Kamchatka we skied for a massive 11,570 metres on the flanks of the dormant 2,175m Viluchinski volcano, and with the weather holding clear and sunny for the following four days, we never achieve less than 8,000 or 9,000 metres of "vert" each day. One day we even ski into the crater of Mutnovski volcano, beside hissing vents and bubbling thermal pools.

It is demanding stuff, since conditions on the slopes can vary considerably due to Kamchatka's maritime location, but the guides are adept at finding the best snow. We experience everything from smooth and creamy "spring snow" on sun-warmed afternoon slopes to unforgettable evening runs on north-facing pitches where the powder is still soft and deep and the "rooster tails" we kick up in hard turns glitter in the sun's golden glow.

This may be how it was in the early days in the Alps - just a few friends skiing empty slopes in spring sunshine - though they would not have had the forgiving powder skis we benefited from, nor, of course, a huge helicopter to take them back for more at the end of each run.

And more is what you want, however tired you become, because nowhere else will you find skiing to compare with that of Kamchatka.

The Compact Guide: How To Get There

Aeroflot (020 7355 2233; aeroflot.co.uk) offer flights from Heathrow to Petro-pavlovsk (a nine-hour internal flight after changing at Moscow) from £525 return.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The heliski season runs from March to mid-May. Elemental Adventure (0870 738 7838; eaheliskiing.com) offer eight-day packages from £2,650 per person including transfers, full board, 10 hours' helicopter time (approximately 35 runs), guides, ski rental and safety equipment. Flights and visas not included.

Other routes to heliskiing heaven

Heliskiing was invented in 1965 by Hans Gmoser, a mountain guide. Its spiritual home remains the Bugaboo Mountains, a small chain in the Canadian Rockies. In most destinations, skiers of all abilities are welcome, but you will need to be competent on intermediate and advanced terrain if you aspire to the serious stuff.

CANADA: The industry is centred around 10 or so lodges in the Rockies. The largest operators are Canadian Mountain Holidays (canadianmountainholidays.com), but there are a number of smaller operators for those seeking a more exclusive wilderness experience. Prices start from around £1,900 a week full board, not including international flights.

HIMALAYAS: Skiing in the region began with the British Raj, and heliskiing in Manali and Gulmarg in India offers a huge variety of runs. Elemental Adventure (eaheliskiing.com) offer holidays here, while Heliski-nepal (heliskinepal.com) organise trips in the neighbouring state.

ALASKA: The one catch in this spectacular location is the weather, which can be appalling. Most operators offer refunds if they can't fly, but usually only in the form of another holiday the following season. When the weather is clear, however, stable snow means a reduced risk of avalanches. Prices start at around



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RUSSIA: Another popular destination is Krasnaya Poliana in the Caucasus Mountains, a region known as "the powder house". Former Soviet military choppers have something of a reputation, so you need to make sure you choose a trustworthy operator. Vertikalny Mir (vertikalny-mir.com) offer week-long packages from £2,600.

TURKEY: The Kackar range may only be 100km long by 35km wide, but the heliskiing is world class. Runs of a 1,000 vertical metres are common, and a lack of tree skiing is more than made up for by breathtaking terrain. Prices start at £3,560 for a week. Details: eaheliskiing.com