

Fresh Tracks at the End of the World

Alf Alderson goes heli-skiing in the land of fire and ice

Words and photos by Alf Alderson

They're giving money away on the Kamchatka peninsula – well, they are in the Cosmic Nightclub.

I'd ventured into the premier nightspot of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, the peninsula's capital, with a mixed bunch of skiers from England, Holland and Russia, and we found ourselves surrounded by locals keen to meet the new dudes in town as soon as we got through the door.

New faces are not too common here; Kamchatka is nine time zones and almost 7,000 kms east of Moscow, yet is nominally still 'Russian'.

It's only since the end of the Cold War that Russians, let alone Westerners, have been allowed to visit this spectacular land, and it was pretty bizarre to be given the red carpet treatment almost as soon as we walked into the Cosmic simply because we weren't locals.



Which is how I chanced across the free money. Whilst standing at the bar I was engaged in conversation by Sergei, a 20-something local who told me he 'collects' money (I

thought we all tried to do that in one way or

another?) and asked if I had any Sterling or Euros on me.

Needless to say I thought this was just a ploy to get some cash out of a witless foreigner, but it turned out that Sergei's hobby is collecting foreign currency. When I told him I only had Russian cash - understandably given that I was in a Russian nightclub - he dug some Chinese notes out of his wallet and invited me to check them out; then he said "You can have them".

I was reluctant to take his money, even though it was actually of no use to either of us in the present circumstances, but Sergei insisted. "No, no, I don't need, I have much Chinese money. Take it as souvenir".

And I still have it, my souvenir of skiing in Kamchatka. And should I ever go to China I guess it may even come in useful.

“

Something told me this was going to be a little different from the average ski trip,”

But to be honest you don't need physical souvenirs from a ski trip to Kamchatka. This is a place so unlike anywhere else on Earth that it will sear itself into your memory for the rest of your life.

Indeed, as our long flight from Moscow descended over the glinting blue waters of Avacha Bay to Kamchatsky-Petropavlovsk Airport a few days earlier, something told me

this was going to be a little different from the

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This airport is a far cry from most international hubs for a start - Mount Avachinsky rises almost 3,000 metres above the runway in a perfect cone, topped off with an exotic banner of volcanic steam and gases billowing from its summit crater.

This mix of magnificent Pacific coastline and stupendous snow draped volcano is about as apt an introduction to Kamchatka as any skier could have, since the next few days will be spent skiing down various volcanoes, including the one you've just flown past.



Yes, it's a long journey to get here and Aeroflot may do all they can to put you off ever setting foot in an airport again, but once in Kamchatka you enter a parallel universe, part-wilderness, part-Russian, part-Far Eastern and 100 per cent mind blowing.

It became apparent that I'd hit on something pretty special after my very first descent on the dormant 2,176-metre Vilyuchinsky Volcano.

All the effects of jet lag evaporated after the

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final turn of the run with screaming quads and smiling face - actually, that's a lie, I was laughing like a lunatic.

“

I was laughing like a lunatic. Skiing really doesn't get much better.

”

Twelve of us had just shared a massive, wide open powder field set at the kind of angle that is exciting but not terrifying, surrounded by some of the most pristine mountain landscapes on earth and with not another skier for thousands of kilometres in any direction.

Skiing really doesn't get much better.

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We'd been led by Marco Gaiani, a Chamonix-based UIAGM guide of few words, laconic wit and a certain French insouciance, who over the next four days did a superb job of searching out the best conditions on each of the peaks we skied.

This is not easy, for despite Kamchatka's impressive snowfalls the peninsula's close proximity to the Pacific adds moisture to that snow, and gale force winds are a regular

HOT SPOTS - CRAZY KAMCHATKA FACTS

- The Kamchatka Peninsula covers an area the size of Japan but has a population just one 300th the size. Most of its 400,000 citizens are

feature of the Kamchatkan based in the

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slabs and snow ridges at the exposed tops of some runs, and occasionally ran into wet, heavy snow lower down the mountain.

This capricious climate will also inevitably lead to some downtime since more than a few consecutive days of good winter weather is unheard of in this part of the world.

But thanks to the expertise of Marco and his fellow Russian guide Vitaly, nine times out of ten as soon as we dropped off the top of the peaks we were into vast, fantastic fields of powder.

- It has the highest concentration of grizzly bears on the planet (some of which you may see if you're skiing late in the season).

- It has one of the world's largest wild salmon populations
- It's one of the most volcanically active regions on Earth - the peninsula has 29 active volcanoes, nine of which have erupted in the last few years. We skied on four active volcanoes - Avachinsky (2751m), Zhupanovsky (2923m), Mutnovski (2322m) and Koryaksky (3456m) which

last erupted in

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Of course, you have to get to the top of the mountains first, and that in itself is an adventure.

We've all heard horror stories about Russian helicopters, of course, but at no point in our four days of flying did I feel ill at ease in our Mi-8 helicopter - the pilots have knowledge of these mountains

and their weather patterns that is second to none, whilst the mechanics could probably build a particle accelerator from an old washing up bottle and a rubber band.

“

You can stick your head out of the windows as you fly along. Imagine trying that in North America...

”

That said, imagine an old school bus, put some rotor blades on the roof and at the rear end and you now have a Mi-8. Sort of.

They shake, they rattle, they roll and they

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And best of all you can stick your head out of the porthole-like windows as you fly along - imagine trying to do that at a North American heliski operation...

ELEMENTAL LANDSCAPES

Marco indicates where he wants the pilot to touch down after having checked out the planned run from the helicopter, or if the surface isn't suitable the chopper will hover a couple of feet above the snow as skiers leap out of the doorway then skis are passed out.

We tuck down in a foetal position to avoid being blasted by the rotor driven snow, especially as the beast takes off, and then, as the blizzard finally settles and calm returns to the mountains, we rise to our feet and survey the elemental landscape beneath.

Wild mountains and volcanoes, some smoking like a tugboat, lay in all directions but east, where Pacific swells 2,000 metres below crash against black sand beaches.



Marco says little but appreciates that this is the kind of primordial, awe inspiring scenery that needs to be taken in at leisure, and he is

rarely in any rush to get us moving, but when

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In truth most of the runs we ski are so wide that there's room to spread out and find your own line.

“

The standard comment from every skier is: 'Best run of my life!'

”

They are also so long that several breaks are taken along the way to kick back, enjoy the view and check out the tracks we've laid down on virgin Russian powder (it's also a good excuse for a much needed rest in most cases).

We start on wide open alpine terrain, glaciers shining blue to one side, a smoking volcanic fumarole giving off pungent fumes to the other, then drop into a steeper gully or maybe a massive natural half-pipe.

Lower down the terrain opens up into undulating powder fields which give way to widely spaced birch woodlands - not really tree skiing but a nice touch of variety - and on the longer runs we literally head all the way to sea level.

And as we eventually ski up to the waiting helicopter the standard comment from every skier is "Best run of my life!"

There may be

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(our biggest day involved over 11,570 metres of vertical) and I've never felt so tired in my life when returning from a

day on skis.

So after four consecutive days like this it's actually something of a relief when a blizzard comes howling in off the Pacific and we're grounded.

“

I've never felt so tired in my life when returning from a day on skis.

”

A chance to rest the quads and see the city is warmly welcomed by both me and my ski buddy Rob since this is our first trip to Russia and so far all we've seen of it is snow, sea and mountains; not to mention the fact that neither of us can descend the stairs of our hotel without cries of pain as our legs react to the 33,000 metres of 'vert' we've clocked up in the last four days.

TOTAL WILDERNESS

Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky is an isolated city by anyone's standards - no roads connect it to the 'outside' world so you have to fly in or come by ship, and it's surrounded by

volcanic mountains and the storm tossed

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Russian nuclear submarine base of Rybachiy you're in total wilderness, with brown bears, tundra wolves, Arctic fox, lynx, wolverine, sable and eagle more numerous than humans.

The city (Петропáвловск-Камчáтский in Russian) was named by explorer Vitus Bering in the late 1780s and has always been something of a 'wild east' town, attracting explorers, hunters and trappers and lately eco-tourism (if you can call activities that include bear hunting 'eco').

As we wander around the slushy streets of downtown 'PK' we can see signs of the illegal wildlife hunting that takes place in the local market, where lynx, bear and wolfskin hats are for sale and items like bear claw key rings can be had for a few roubles.

We even get to see some of the wildlife - a trip to the derelict outskirts of town on the shores of Avacha Bay brings us to a sea lion colony.



I'd never realised just how huge these animals are until I get to within a few metres of them, basking in the April sunshine and honking their displeasure at whatever it is that displeases sea lions.

We also get to ski one of PK's two small ski

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of basic t-bars, 500-metres of vertical and spectacular views over the city's docks and Avacha Bay.

Unfortunately the snow is like liquid cement so one run is enough, but since you pay just a few roubles for each ride on the t-bar we're not exactly left out of pocket.



This is actually the last ski we get in Kamchatka, as the blizzard raging up in the mountains doesn't let up during the rest of our stay.

“

In the local market bear claw key rings can be had for a few roubles.

”

Since the region is known for its harsh climate (despite being on the same latitude as Lincolnshire) it isn't unexpected, but it's disappointing not to get one last outing to harvest the riches of those wild, remarkable mountains.

But riches such as these are never easy to

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EA Heliskiing (eaheliskiing.com; info@eaheli.com) offer six-day heliski packages to Kamchatka for €5,800.

London - Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky return with Aeroflot costs from €700.

The heliski season runs from mid-March to mid-May.

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