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The land of fire and ice

Kamchatka is a volcano-studded wilderness that offers primal thrills: active craters, monster grizzly bears and some of the planet's most outlandish heliskiing

Story by Alf Alderson



Our bright orange helicopter edged in to the drop-off just beneath the steaming summit of the 2,751-metre Avachinsky volcano. Excitement mounted among us. Eyes darted left to right, gloves and goggles given last-second adjustments, then the metal beast touched down and guides Marco and Vitaly shouted "Go! Go!", slapping us on the back as we lept clumsily out in our ski boots to land in virgin Kamchatkan powder. The clattering helicopter rose again sending snow swirling viciously about us. We hunkered down, shielding faces and holding onto hats until it had swung away from us to swoop down into a distant valley, 1,500 metres below, to our later rendezvous point.

Silence returned to the mountains, but not for long. Gasps and exclamations rose in the icy air as we all surveyed the remote, wild landscape that surrounded us. Ranks of mountains stretched away in

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all directions but for the east, where far below the cobalt blue Pacific lay, corrugated by swells pulsing south from the Arctic Ocean.

Clearly this was to be no regular ski holiday. As one of a handful of skiers to sign up for this remarkable trip to Russia's untracked and untamed Far East, I'd been tempted by shots of snowbound primeval landscapes. Kamchatka is one of the most active volcanic regions on Earth, and we were going to ski thousands of metres at a time down the flanks of smoking volcanoes all the way to the black-sand shores of the Pacific Ocean. An average day of skiing here would see us descend more vertical than Everest and end in style, with us wallowing in natural hot springs while sipping a glass of Russian champagne.

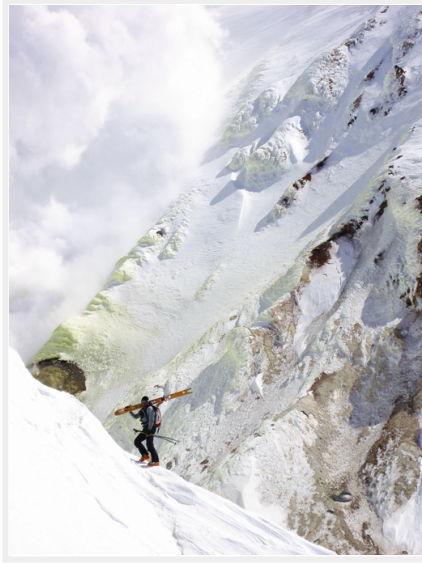


At that moment, we had champagne views to drink in and the promise of champagne powder to come. Marco led off with a strict command to: "Follow my tracks unless I say otherwise." There were crevasses, avalanche-prone slopes and cliffs to be wary of, he said, and he knew where they were. Dropping off the top of the windy, rocky ridge we were straight into pristine powder; huge snowfields opening up under our skis; long, steep couloirs beckoning; and we swooped through shin-deep snow beside glaciers glinting ice-blue in the sunlight, and passing volcanic vents hissing steam into impossibly clear mountain skies.

Later in the day we skied literally to the edge of a volcano – 2,332-metre Mutnovski Peak – which like its near neighbour Avachinsky, last blew its top only eleven years ago. To reach the crater we first skied down steep slopes of windblown powder before skidding to a halt beneath the lip of this void

in the Earth's surface. The stench of sulphur and hydrogen sulphide filled the air, and Marco shouted "Don't spend too much time close to the crater, the atmosphere is poisonous!"

All the same, it was impossible to resist the chance to unclip from my skis, scabble 25 metres up the rubble and ash of the crater's side and gaze down into what are quite literally the bowels of the Earth.



The scalding steam rising from the depths had stained the inner walls toxic shades of sulphur yellow, chromium green and metallic red, and the volcano hissed like a gigantic chemical plant. It was an unforgettable sight and not the kind of spectacle you normally encounter on a ski holiday – no resort on earth can match this for off-the-wall highs.

Mutnovski was far from the only active peak around: plumes of volcanic smoke broke the horizon in several places, a surreal sight that put me in mind of how much of the Earth must have looked back when it was still being shaped. Thankfully none of the volcanoes were erupting for real. Koryaksky, a 3,456-metre monster which had been inactive for more than 50 years, put on a major show in 2009 with an ash column that towered 4,000 metres and extended 20 kilometres from the volcano.

Sat at the same latitude as Alaska, Kamchatka's wilderness feel is enhanced by its wealth of wildlife too, particularly its grizzly bears. The peninsula has the planet's highest concentration of these immense predators, though despite them being officially protected, they are still the prey to hunters such as the two Americans we had met at our hotel.

Marco warned us at one point that we might see grizzlies emerging from hibernation since we were skiing in spring, and laconically told us: "I skied past a mother and cubs last season. Very quickly."

As it happened we didn't encounter any grizzlies, but we did see majestic Stellar's sea eagles soaring overhead, since half of the world's population live in Kamchatka, and encountered sea lions at the coast.



Putting aside the volcanoes and grizzlies, the skiing itself requires a good level of ability and an appetite for adventure. Conditions can vary from perfect knee-deep powder to windblown crud and heavy wet 'spring' snow, and the untracked slopes may be as steep as the most challenging black runs in the Alps or Rockies.

James Morland, director of Elemental Adventure who had arranged the trip, was accompanying us and explained: "It's tough skiing, and we make no attempt to hide that from potential clients, but it's

also the most unique heliski experience available”.

No doubt. It also requires a thick wallet since helicopter travel doesn't come cheap. Clients tend to be successful business people and entrepreneurs – our group consisted of three affable Anglo-Dutch bankers and a group of Muscovite ‘businessmen’ who appeared to have money to throw around. Quite where all their roubles (and dollars) came from they didn't seem inclined to elaborate upon...

The Kamchatkan climate is as wild as the landscape and James had warned us to expect “around four days skiing in your ten-day visit since helicopter pilots don't appreciate flying in blizzards”. We were thrilled, therefore, to wake up on our first morning to clear blue skies, a pattern that, unusually, continued for the following four days.

Each day began with a leisurely breakfast (there was never any rush to hit the slopes since it's light until after 9pm this far north) followed by a clunky coach journey along potholed roads from our hotel in the former military city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky (aka 'PK'). The city was settled by explorer Vitus Bering in 1740 and until the end of the Cold War was a remote and distant hidey-hole for Russian military forces.

Today it finds itself in the bizarre position of being a little bit of European Russia in the heart of Asia with a mixed population which reflects this, and an economy still struggling to come to terms with Russia's recent headlong rush to embrace capitalism – hence the potholed roads since no one seems

to be too interested in mundane activities like developing a proper transport infrastructure.



At the helicopter base we would clamber out of the coach and into a very utilitarian Mi-8 helicopter to judder up into the sky and scud above low, birch-covered hills before eventually climbing up into the real mountains. Mi-8s are not for timid flyers: they rattle, they stink of aviation fuel, the hard bench seats have no seat belts, and there's no safety drill. But I did appreciate the porthole-style windows out of which you can stick your head for better views and great photos.

After typically 20 minutes of flying, we were dropped off in the heart of landscape that hasn't appreciably changed for 10,000 years, and where signs of humankind are non-

existent. This, undoubtedly, was ‘adventure skiing’...

Rarely was a run less than a kilometre from top to bottom – some were more than two kilometres – so rest stops were unavoidable, at which came a chorus of the soon-predictable exclamations of “Best run of my life!” followed by wide grins and enthusiastic whoops.

After one particularly fine descent down Koryaksky, now settled down again after its 2008-2009 activity, I asked our Russian guide Vitali what the run was called. He shrugged. “It doesn't have a name – give it one if you like”.



Down days, when the weather had closed in and grounded our helicopter, weren't wasted either. We went exploring Petropavlovsk, including trying out the two small and very basic local ski hills. Another such day we went dog sledding through the birch forests that begin on the outskirts of town and extend for hundreds of kilometres. With a handful of heliskiers driving the sleds, a competitive spirit soon kicked in and the Siberian huskies – noisily enthusiastic and hugely energetic – were only too ready to encourage this. The inevitable result was the occasional sledder ejected from their ride on tight corners to all-round hilarity.

At the end of a day's strenuous activity out in the cold we needed to refuel, fast. But dinner at our hotel, the three-star Petropavlovsk, the ritziest hotel in town, was invariably a test of patience. The place was a far cry from your average Alpine chalet. It was friendly enough but the service was haphazard, with our food arriving at least half an hour after we had placed our order and often at the wrong table. Approached with the right attitude though it offered its own brand of entertainment plus the local fish wasn't bad since Kamchatka has one of the largest wild salmon runs in the world.

One evening five of us opted to dine at the 'Bush Bar' restaurant in downtown 'PK' where Russian was the only language spoken. I'm still not sure what we ate, partly because of the gloomy lighting but mainly because the only way we could order from the indecipherable Cyrillic alphabet was to

phone our English-speaking hotel receptionist who liaised with the waiter over the phone then chose and ordered on our behalf.

After dinner the energetic Dutch contingent would invariably coax the rest of us along to the surprisingly cosmopolitan Cosmic Nightclub next door to our hotel. "Coom on boys, you know you'll love it!" and they were right, tired as we were, we usually did. We opted to down rum and coke rather than the fearsome local vodka, served by a cocktail waiter who insisted on spinning every glass in the air - while full - before handing it over.



Every night we attracted keen interest from the local punters since tourists are not yet a common sight in Kamchatka. The attention was quite welcome when it came from attractive local girls but when a burly Russian fisherman attached himself to my pal Rob one night, it was suddenly time to scurry through the snowdrifts back to the hotel.

Amazingly, even after a heavy night at the Cosmic everyone was up and raring to go the next day - but then who would miss a helicopter flight into some of the world's most spectacular mountain scenery and the chance to skim down slopes that only a handful of skiers have ever tasted before?

The somewhat surreal feel of the entire trip was perhaps summed up in an encounter one morning with a local skier at the end of a long run down Avachinsky. Coming to the end of our run in bright sunlight, we were greeted by a dude ski touring up the mountain dressed only in ski boots, a backpack and a skimpy thong. Dressed ready for a day on the beach, he was quite comfortable it seems with both the frigid air and our bemused looks.

Kamchatka and its people offer contradictions aplenty: a land sculpted by fire, but cloaked in snow and ice; a wild east where the bigger the cowboy, the bigger the Rolex; but however strange it is, you have to say, it seems very comfortable in its own skin! AA



Practicalities

When to go

The Kamchatkan ski season is quite short: running from March to mid-May. Any earlier and the conditions are just too cold and potentially stormy.

How to get there

Getting to Kamchatka is hard work. You have to travel via Moscow (on Aeroflot from Hong Kong for example), to Petropavlovsk–Kamchatsky on the world's longest internal flight. Sadly, and rather strangely, the Russian national carrier doesn't have flights from its eastern 'capital' of Vladivostok to 'PK'.

What to take

You'll need clothing suited to weather conditions that can vary from positively Arctic to spring-like, as well as fat powder skis. Avalanche safety equipment is provided. Take a good camera: you'll get the best ski shots of your life.

Contacts and further info

Elemental Adventure, www.eaheliskiing.com, are based in London, and offer six-day packages from EUR 5,100 per person. This includes seven nights' accommodation, eight hours' helicopter time, three internationally certified guides and all safety equipment. Extra flying time is charged at EUR 330/person/hour. The helicopter is typically shared by 12 skiers.

Other operators are also based in Europe and include include Alpin Travel, www.alpintravel.ch, from Switzerland and Premium Experiences, www.premiumexperiences.com, from Italy.

Russian-speakers can try the local operator, Red Cat, <http://kam-cat.ru>

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