

FINANCIAL TIMES

How to spend it

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The helicopter pitches and slews, descending in uneven steps. The side door slides open. Two guides and the burly flight engineer take turns peering out into the white abyss before conversing in sign language. With a thud, one wheel lodges in the snow and the guides are thrusting our skis out of the door.

We get the signal to go. The next minute passes in a flush of anticipation: filing up the fuselage, jumping out into deep snow, scrambling along a ledge of crust, huddling into the side of the mountain with other skiers. The roar of the rotors intensifies. When the helicopter is 15m above us, the down draught whips a maelstrom of ice crystals through the air. There is a final shudder of wind and noise as the helicopter peels away from the ridge and drops like a lead weight down a well. Seconds later, it is the size of a dragonfly in the valley below.

The snow settles. In the instant before the gasps of incredulity begin, there is no sound: only the silence of the mountains – an intimidating silence, a silence you can feel. Like waking dancers in a ballet, we all rise and cautiously turn to face the view. It is a view that will change the way I think about wilderness forever.

Immediately below us, ridges of black cinder protrude from a white cloth which leads down through untracked snowfields to a glistening basin 2,000m below. To

The journey to Kamchatka is arduous and the season short but the thrill of heli-skiing among live volcanos is incomparable. Words and photographs by Rob Penn.



the right, a plume of grey vapour drifts languidly up from the fractured caldera of a volcano. Beyond that is an effulgent royal blue expanse – the Pacific Ocean. To the north the winter wonderland rolls away through deep rift valleys and over mountain ridges and plateaux dotted evenly with dozens of volcanos for hundreds of kilometres. It is a panorama of transcendent

beauty. Alf, one of the other bewildered skiers, says to no one in particular, "It's a landscape from prehistory."

Actually, the landscape of the Kamchatka Peninsula in far eastern Russia is still in the clamour of creation. With about 200 volcanos, 29 of which still erupt, Kamchatka is the most seismically active place on the planet and an integral part of

the volcanic Ring of Fire, which encircles the Pacific. This territory is in a cycle of almost continual rebirth, as a huge eruption 200 miles to the west across the Sea of Okhotsk the day before we arrived attested. Mutnovsky, the smoking crater we can see, last blew its top in 2000.

Other than vulcanologists and devotees of Risk (the board game of world conquest in which the peninsula is strategically valuable if you wish to invade North America), few people have heard of Kamchatka. During the Cold War, it was a closed military zone and a target area for missile testing. Today, the peninsula attracts a few hardy salmon fishermen and, controversially, trophy hunters who come to shoot brown bear. It is also beginning to lure adventurous skiers.

"We have been bringing Russian clients here for 10 years now," Nikolay Veselovski, owner of the Russian ski-tour operator, said when he picked us up from the airport in Petropavlovsk the evening before. "But the numbers are small. Yes, every year there are more foreign guides and groups, but we still don't see anyone else in the mountains. It will never be overrun. The season is short and it is just not an easy place to get to."

For British skiers, you would be hard pushed to find anywhere more difficult to get to, and my journey here had been suitably epic. Arriving at Heathrow before dawn, I discovered that Aeroflot had lost

SUPER-SEISMIC ME



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Main picture: the Mi-8 descends
in front of a volcano in Russia's
Kamchatka Peninsula before
(inset) dropping off the skiers.



On our first run, we descend 1,000 vertical metres.
For the second run, the drop is a massive 1,600m.

my ticket, which could not be reissued. It was not a good start. A British Airways flight to Moscow went smoothly enough. At Sheremetyevo airport, I shared a packet of Rothmans with Igor, the domestic terminal manager, while he found an escort to take me through security and check-in, without a ticket. The Moscow to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky flight – nine hours, across nine time zones and 120 degrees of longitude – is the longest non-stop commercial flight in one country's airspace and I landed in a body clock spin.

There was an interlude for fitful sleep at the hotel, then a bus journey through the cratered streets of the regional capital and a 30-minute helicopter flight – in a hulking, twin-turbine Mi-8 – to drop me, a day and a half after I left home, on the side of Vilyuchinski volcano (2,277m). Yet one glimpse of this remarkable landscape would justify the trip. Drugged by the mesmerising beauty of it, I feel ecstatic, and we have not even skied a vertical metre. My reverie is finally broken by the singsong voice of our guide, Marco Gaiani, a member of the venerated *Compagnie des Guides de Haute Montagne* in Chamonix and a veteran of several seasons in Kamchatka: “OK? Ready, Rob? Iz time to ski, non?”

On our first run, aligning our fat skis cautiously in Marco's tracks through a wide bowl which narrows and then spills out on to the valley bottom, we descend 1,000

vertical metres. In the second run, the drop is a massive 1,600m. By lunchtime, we have skied a staggering 6,600m. We fall on the picnic – hunks of smoked salmon on rye, salami and cheese sandwiches, chocolate biscuits – like shipwrecked sailors making landfall. Slurping black tea that has never tasted so good, Marco explains why we need to ski so hard.

“The weather here is hard to predict. On a perfect day like this, we ski every minute. For sure, it's tough on your first day, but who knows what happens tomorrow? Over

10 days, the average is four days' heli-skiing. The rest is downtime, because of wind and storms.” By 7pm, the sun is sinking like a burnished coin in the western sky. Our total descent is over 11,000m and my legs are crying out for downtime. The last descent on wet “spring snow” affords breathtaking views of the coast where fretted fingers of white curve out into the ocean now gilded by sunlight. Skiing down, we can hear the crashing surf and we finish on a stony, half-moon

Above: the run down to the Pacific Ocean. Below: a fumarole vent emitting hot gases on the Mutnovsky volcano.

beach. The Russian skiers who have been sharing the helicopter, strip naked and plunge into the debilitatingly cold north Pacific.

Flying home, the helicopter has the air of a chill-out room at a rave. Everyone is exhausted and coming down. I am still enthralled by the landscape, though, and Marco points out a distant row of submarines at the Russian naval base.

Kamchatka has been of strategic importance since the early days of maritime exploration. Soon we are flying over Avacha Bay, a perfect natural harbour used by the Danish explorer Vitus Bering on a scientific expedition in 1740. He laid the foundation stone of Petropavlovsk (named after his two ships *St Peter* and *St Paul*) on his way to discover that Asia and America were not contiguous.

In the morning, the sky is clear and breathless again. We fly north over forests of thin birch trees to the Aag massif. The runs are shorter and the snow conditions change continually as we work our way round the mountain and the sun strengthens. We ski on ice, surface hoar, spring snow, wind crust, sun crust and wave snow, but because of the gently sloping flanks of the volcanos, the skiing here never seems to be less than manageable.

On the last run before lunch, we hit the dreaded “semi-breakable crust”,





Above: the skiing day starts late in Kamchatka, giving the sun time to soften the snow.

which reduces me to a clumsy beginner. Even James Morland, owner of Elemental Adventure, the UK company we're travelling with and a supremely confident big-mountain skier, is cautious in these conditions. "It's killer stuff. Better to take your time," he says, pausing beside me to swallow another gargantuan view across to the near perfect cone of Koryaksky volcano (3,456m). "The sole aim is to get down with your knees intact."

In the afternoon, we fly around to the far side of Koryaksky and enter skiing nirvana. It seems as if we have stumbled upon powder, but in fact the guides are

studying wind speed, wind direction, air temperature and the bearing of the slopes in a continuous search for the best snow. We have to edge carefully off the top of the volcano through exposed patches of lava into the wide bowl. Then Marco turns to our group of six and says: "Iz safe here. Pick your own line and go." The whooping starts immediately. Ten turns, 30 turns, 50 turns; the powder froths round my waist, the bowl goes on and on and my quadriceps are raging. We ski the same run again and again, picking fresh lines each time, until the lambent light is fading

and the mountainside is woven with hundreds of intricate, wiggling tracks.

A pattern begins to emerge. Each day we start late to allow the sun to soften the snow. A 30-minute helicopter ride brings us to a different mountain where the scenic theme is repeated with decorative variations. We ski like our lives depend on it. Every day has a highlight. On Mutnovsky, we ski into the caldera, weaving among the fumaroles and peering over a lip of crumbling rock into the bubbling heart of the volcano. On Zhupanovsky, we finish sipping champagne and bathing our limbs in a natural hot spring. On Bakening, we do not see

a single sign of human life all day, hinting at the vast wilderness (an area larger than the British Isles) that lies beyond. In the dark, we return to the basic but comfortable hotel in Petropavlovsk, eat huge dinners of prawns and baked halibut then crumple on to our beds.

It is seamless until our sixth morning when we wake up in a whiteout. Snow is piling up in the hotel car park. The storm rages without interruption for three days. The planes to Moscow are not flying, let alone the helicopters. In frustration, we become nocturnal. Our waking hours are spent in the Cosmic nightclub. By day, we lie in bed listening to the wind drone through the hotel.

"You have been lucky," Nikolay says on the way to the airport. "Five days of good skiing is better than average." I know this. Skiing will never be the same again. After take-off, the aeroplane banks round in front of Koryaksky. Through the gaps in the swirling, low cloud, I can see the flanks of the volcano. Our ski tracks have been erased by fresh snow, but the memory of making them is indelible. ♦

BLOWN AWAY

Rob Penn was a guest of **Elemental Adventure Heli Skiing Worldwide** (0870-738 7838; www.eaheliskiing.com) which organises trips to more than 15 different locations worldwide. Eight days heli-skiing in Kamchatka (the season runs from mid-March to mid-May), including 10 hours' helicopter flying time, transfers, full-board accommodation in Petropavlovsk and skiing in groups of six with two guides and safety equipment costs from about £2,650, excluding flights.