



LAND OF FIRE AND ICE

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In the mysterious and wild frontier region of Russia's Kamchatka peninsula, the elements clash as cinder-spewing, active volcanoes sit cheek by jowl with steaming geysers, snowy glaciers...and Eurasia's largest population of protected brown bears

An extinct volcano looms over the Kronotsky Nature Reserve in Kamchatka (previous pages). The peninsula accommodates 29 of the world's active volcanoes. A brown bear

among the geothermal steam clouds of the Valley of Geysers (right). Eurasia's largest bear species can exceed 7.9 ft in length and stand almost 10 ft tall on its hind legs

In the bruised lapis hue of late afternoon in Kamchatka, Alexei the pilot rises from his bed and washes his face. He tucks a gold crucifix beneath the hem of his undershirt and buttons his thick plaid shirt. There are at least two fresh bear paw prints close to our cabin's entrance, but Alexei appears unperturbed by the presence of Eurasia's largest bear species so close to the lodge where we've picked at smoked fish and eaten borscht. As we prepare to venture again into the Kronotsky Nature Reserve, the aircraft's rotors begin to churn the earth. Vapor spewed from the world's second largest geyser field temporarily cloaks the valley. With spectacular theater, the hot springs project columns of sulfur and steam into the air, mixing with the first strains of pollen to form a layer of turmeric dust.

During 10 long minutes of spiraling ascent, we seem to continue the same ten-thousand-year retrograde journey that we unwittingly began when we landed in Kamchatka four days earlier. The volcanoes of the reserve surround us. Some are steep other rises capped by smoke and sulfur. Others contain iced craters of shimmering teal acid. Grey ash streaks the bulky, bulbous hillocks, which have co-joined and overlapped and split and fused during millennia of tectonic fraternization. Now, they mark Kronotsky like the dark ticks that are plucked from reindeer by the Koriak and Itelmen herders who walk in the valleys below. As we approach one spectacular crevice, Alexei steadies the helicopter. For approximately 10 seconds, we hover above one of the last remaining frontier lands on earth.

The Kamchatka peninsula remains one of the most mysterious destinations in the world. On airport maps of the Russian

Federation, the province's capital is often lit with a small blinking red diode, reminding us that a city does indeed exist, against all probability, on the eastern fringe of the earth. Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky is the gateway to Kamchatka and glints like a bead of red caviar misplaced by a snacking pilot on a poorly proportioned aviation chart. Although emphatically Russian, the city is situated 4,204 miles and nine time zones east of the country's capital.

Among the peninsula's volcanoes, rivers, and thermal springs live 37 different species of mammal. Here, Russia's largest bear population feeds contentedly on some of the world's greatest salmon stocks. Animals amble between the area's many micro-climates with relative ease. Humans rely on helicopters, off-road vehicles, snow-mobiles, and dog-sleds to navigate even small sections of the undulating terrain. Despite accommodating more than 320,000 people, Kamchatka's extreme climate has impeded the creation of infrastructure. Petropavlovsk remains the second largest city on earth, after Iquitos in Peru, with no connection by road to the wider world.

Existing guidebooks give rote statistics like these, while expounding the endless adventure possibilities that exist here, but Kamchatka retains its enigma by never yielding its picaresque mysteries. During a nine-hour flight from Moscow, I read the naturalist Stepan Petrovich Krasheninnikov's 1755 account of the expedition he made to the region 13 years earlier with the Danish explorer Vitus Bering.

"It is difficult to generalize as to whether the disadvantages of Kamchatka outweigh the advantages," Krasheninnikov writes, in a passage that only confounds the reader farther. "On the one hand, the country has

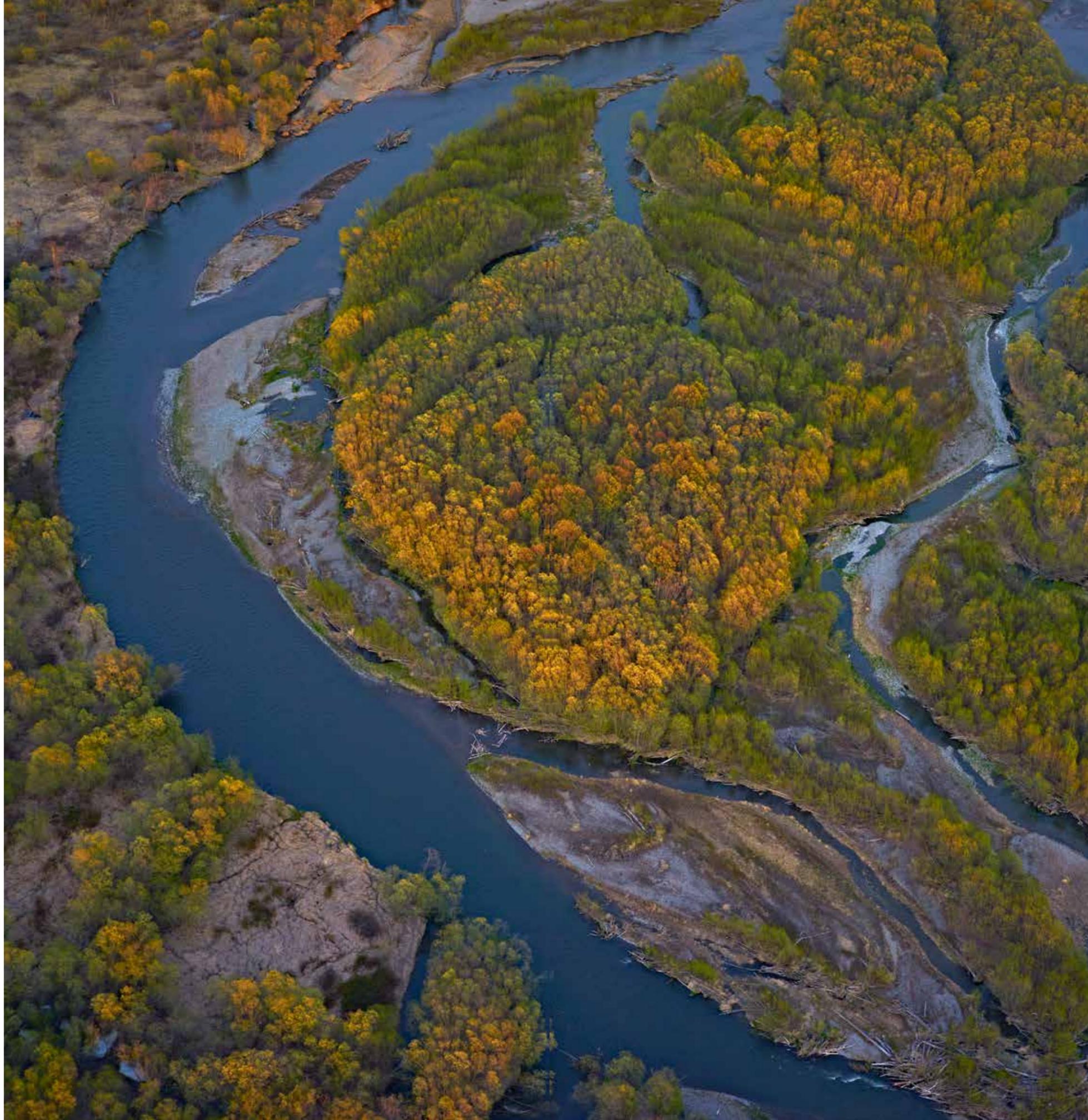


neither grain nor livestock. It is subject to frequent earthquakes, floods, and storms, and the only diversions are to gaze on towering mountains with summits eternally covered with snow, or, if one lives along the sea, to listen to the crashing of the waves and observe the different species of sea animals and consider their intelligence and constant battles with each other. If one considers only these things, it would seem more appropriate for this country to be inhabited by wild animals than by human beings.”

When we first arrive in Petropavlovsk, visibility is non-existent. The sleet is such that the license plates of the vehicle lodged 16 feet in front of us are illegible. The square buildings beside the road are typical of a provincial Russian city, but there is no sign of bears, geysers, or sea otters. Snow turns to rain, and rain turns to snow. Our flight to the interior is canceled and hourly weather forecasts delivered by the heliport are punctual and pessimistic. Atmospheric pressure is said to afflict visitors with headaches, and after walking for a mile beside a congested city road, through the veil of my migraine the dog-walkers and commuters seem unusually solemn.

Suddenly, we're informed that the clouds will soon clear, opening a window to fly north later in the afternoon. We quickly approximate the weight of our baggage and jettison heavy items of food, before driving to an airstrip demarcated by helicopters that are beyond repair and frail yellow flowers known as “the first maids of February” peeking from the summer snow. Alexei's helicopter seems impossibly small, but as we leave Yelizovo, its rotors cleave the low-lying clouds, and we elevate quickly. Volcanoes, it seems, have encircled us since our arrival. They've stood hidden behind a cowl of mist, obscured completely though their summits exceed 9,840 feet.

The Kronotsky Nature Reserve is situated 140 miles northeast of Petropavlovsk. Created in 1934 and now designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Kronotsky is best recognized in scientific circles for the Valley of Geysers. When discovered



The Kamchatka peninsula is laced with 14,000 rivers, 400 glaciers, and 150 thermal springs. Equivalent in size to the state of Connecticut, the reserve contains 4,240 sq mi of active volcanoes and rock formations that swell to form other

contusions along the jagged Pacific coast. The remoteness of the region led the Russian government to exile prisoners there in the 18th century, which, paradoxically, contributed toward opening up the area to settlers

in 1941, it became only the second such topographical site in the whole of Eurasia, containing the second largest number of geysers in the world. As a result, Kronotsky is sometimes called “the land of fire and ice.” While Russia's northern steppe will remain carpeted with old snow for the majority of the summer, Kronotsky is already enjoying a thaw.

As we near the valley, geothermal heat, close to the earth's surface, is defrosting the ground and liquifying the remnants of precipitants past to swell the peninsula's aquifer. We land close to a series of log cabins. Alexei's helicopter rests comfortably on two feet of compacted snow. As the rotors slow, our boots separate the slush, revealing fragments of black asphalt and volcanic ash that glint like wild berries sprinkled upon plump Syrniki pancakes. We're travelers in a place with some of the highest recorded volcanic activity on earth. Molten lava has been known to flow on hillsides strewn with snow and scree.

Sergei, the local ranger, is the custodian of the Valley of Geysers. He lives in a wooden hut that overlooks the Geysernaya river. Clutching an emergency bear flare and an automatic rifle, he leads us into the ravine, because a bear has been sighted there. This is far from unusual in Kamchatka where, in summer, as salmon stocks surge, spotting bears becomes a near everyday occurrence.

However, in late spring many bears are only just awakening from lengthy spells of hibernation. Sergei taps the pathway's wooden railings to warn any testy animals of our approach. When we emerge from the scrub, a bear sits yawning nonchalantly near the pathway in the sun. Early settlers had observed the relative gentleness of Kamchatka bears in comparison to their



Siberian cousins, but wary of angering a mammal that might weigh in excess of 1,400 pounds, I want to slow my pace. Sergei proceeds, cautiously, identifying a further three bears in the vicinity. After fishing and foraging for berries, they are returning, en masse, to their cool mountain dens. The Kronotsky reserve is home to Eurasia's largest population of protected brown bears and the eight hundred who reside here are rascally and curious. Even when we reach a proximity of 10 yards, the bear shows little interest in moving. Eventually, he yields to Sergei, but we're now so close we can make out the texture of his clumpy coat. It's unkempt after hibernation and curiously iridescent. Kamchatka bears are said to be flecked violet, like the burnished nacre shells of the mollusks that litter the beach in Petropavlovsk.

Returning to our cabin, I notice bear paw prints. In our absence the animals have gravitated toward the helicopter, seeking kerosene, which is like catnip to bears and is said to swiftly kill the parasites that cling to their coats.



The city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky (opposite), founded in 1740 by the Danish explorer Vitus Bering, is closer to Anchorage, Alaska, and Sapporo, Japan, than to the Russian capital. A vast fishing industry is the economic mainstay of the region: dried smelt (left) are traditionally eaten in bathhouses; Alexei and his wife, Anya, in their Koriak yurt (below); the population of 320,000 relies on snowmobiles and dog-sleds to traverse the terrain



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Alexei is a member of Kamchatka's indigenous Koriak community. His birth name is Kavav, which means The Day That Grows; his wife, Anya, was born Sunrise, or Wulkanew in their native tongue. When the Russian language became a mandatory strand of education, the couple decided to pick alternate identities that could be easily written in the Cyrillic script.

After an hour-long excursion by quad bike along mud tracks cut through the snow, we meet in the yurt that Alexei and Anya keep to demonstrate the practises of indigenous people. We eat salmon with raw dill, sliced white onions, and pickles. The couple doesn't believe that the life brought to them in Kamchatka by Russian settlers several centuries ago causes direct problems

or conflicts. Laws may be drafted more than four thousand miles away in Moscow, but they have spliced their own language with Russian and assimilated some of the values of that country while retaining their own indigenous beliefs and ideas.

But the longer we spend in Kamchatka, the more I feel perplexed by the peninsula's paradoxes. In good weather the volcanoes are visible and almost impossibly beautiful. In bad weather they disappear completely, and it isn't possible to verify that they are actually there. And the weather is bad in Kamchatka for at least nine months of every year. If you exist so close to beauty but are rarely permitted to see it, does that beauty become a psychological hindrance? Do you begin to wonder whether you're

supposed to see that beauty? After several months, do you start to wonder whether it's actually there? And why do volcanoes fire particles of scalding magma into the troposphere, forming ethereal clouds of cinder that resemble a storm of ermine moths, and yet raze thousands of acres of forest to the ground?

Then I realize that while I can't fully understand Kamchatka, perhaps its mysteries are not intended to be unraveled. Nature on the peninsula has been characterized by extravagant destruction for millennia and will be for perpetuity in this, one of Earth's final frontiers. ♦

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