

Eugene Kaspersky

# Kamchatka: Contrast Country

Vol. II – the South



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# Kamchatka: breathtaking and mind-blowing

In my humble opinion, Kamchatka is *the* most fascinating and beautiful place on the planet.

Voluptuous volcanoes with colossal craters with multicolored lakes + unearthly landscapes all around, geysers and hot springs + lazy wild brown bears + red caviar spread on your sandwiches not with a knife but with... a spade! That's Kamchatka folks.

There's practically nothing of note of human historical/archaeological merit here. Well, apart from local legend and myth, the natives' national dances, plus their names for certain places (Avacha, Ksudach, Opala...). But it's the unique *natural* sights here that give Kamchatka its world-beatingly beautiful status: the grandiose rugged landscapes in general up and down the full length of the peninsula, plus around a dozen extra-special unique locations of natural beauty – all populated with original flora and fauna – in particular. And this dozen or so are all concentrated to within a relatively narrow stretch of territory along the peninsula's southern volcanic ridge. This magical strip of natural beauty is in all just 600km long, running from the Klyuchevskaya Sopka group of volcanoes in the north, via the peninsula's main city Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, and down to the Kambalny and Koshelyov volcanoes in the south.

It's handy having most places of interest in the southern half of Kamchatka: it means you can get to them quickly in a helicopter, or a while longer if you're in off-road vehicles. Bubbling hot springs, geysers; also glaciers, and snow that doesn't melt before September in crevasses and atop volcanoes. Lifeless deserts of volcanic slag – adjoining lush forest with abundant (impassible) underbrush. I've mentioned the bears and the caviar; there are also enormous crabs and killer whales in the surrounding ocean, together with... submarines. All together – stunning, staggering, extraordinary, unparalleled; and varied: a natural... conveyor belt delivering the sharpest of contrasts to your boggled mind one after the other!

Besides Kamchatka, there is one more best-of-the-best places, in my opinion, and that's New Zealand. And it, too, is head and shoulders above all other contenders for the world's most fascinating and beautiful – from the Grand Canyon and Niagara, to Iceland and... the Taj-Mahal, etc. But to me, topping any list (including mine) of must-see best-of-all – it has to be Kamchatka. Simply because it's just way cooler than all the other mega-beautiful places of the world – even New Zealand (although, during a brief moment of weakness, I thought differently). It's simply... fuller: there's more to it.

New Zealand, if you don't hang about, can be fully traversed and inspected in three weeks. We did it in 17 days, but that was in full-on 'tourism till you drop' mode – a little too intense for some. Kamchatka, on the other hand, takes longer to fully – or at least, sufficiently – investigate: its uniquenesses are of a grander scale, but getting to them is much more involved.

Kamchatka doesn't have roads crisscrossing it as New Zealand does. Accordingly, besides just two or three places you can get to by car (slowly: those roads ain't autobahns:), often there are just two ways of getting around the peninsula to see its best places of interest; and curiously, those two ways couldn't be more different: by helicopter, or by foot! And sometimes by foot is the much more practical option, since the weather is so changeable and thus often bad here that sometimes you can be waiting days until a chopper can take off due to safety concerns – it'd be quicker in the end to go on your own two feet – free of charge!





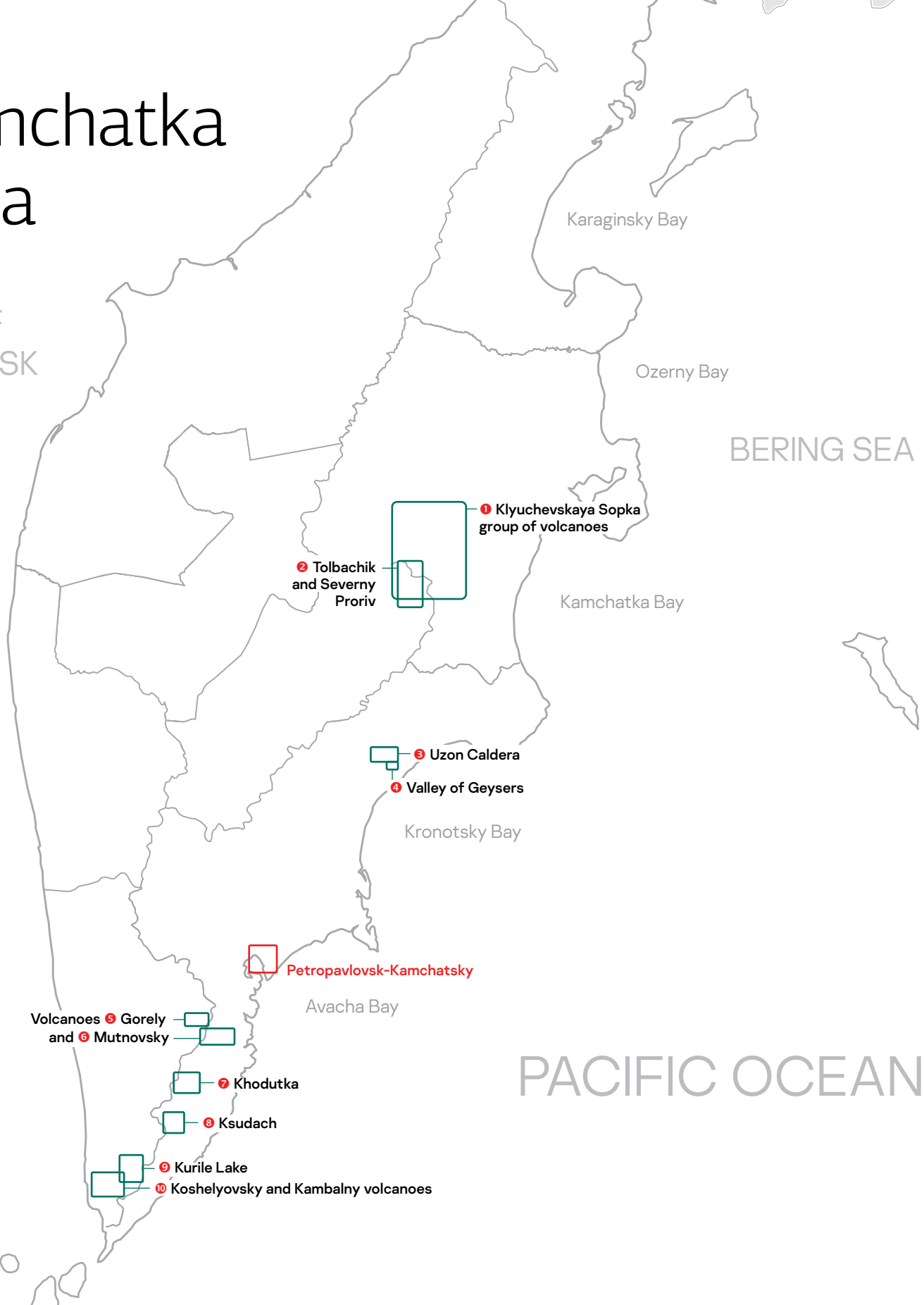






# The Kamchatka Peninsula

SEA OF OKHOTSK



PACIFIC OCEAN

# What do we know about Kamchatka?

Practically in a straight line along the eastern coast of the Kamchatka Peninsula there are 10 unique natural phenomena, each of which could easily be put on the list of the world's best natural wonders. The curious thing is that practically nothing is known about these extraordinary places in the West – or in the East, even in Russia too.

What would the average Russian person stopped in the street say if asked about Kamchatka? Probably: "It's a place where there's plenty of fish, caviar, bears and huge crabs". Some might even be able to add: "It's where the Valley of Geysers is". However, that valley is just one of the 10 Kamchatka wonders. Let me give you the full list, from north to south.

To the north of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky:

1. The Kluchevsky Group – a dozen-or-so huge to mid-sized volcanoes, in a relatively confined space, many shaped as near perfect cones.
2. Tolbachik, and the Severny Proriv (Northern Rupture), which is a black desert – the result of a crack that formed during a long eruption in 1974–75; the landscape was somewhat changed by another eruption in 2012–2013.
- 3-4. The Valley of Geysers and the Uzon caldera – bubbling and erupting thermal and assorted other multicolored volcanisms.

And south of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky:

- 5-6. The Mutnovsky volcano range and the Gorely volcano – monumentally beautiful volcanic structures.
7. Khodutka – the 'coolest' hot lake in the world.
8. Ksudach – a crater inside a crater, a lake, and overall surrealism.
9. Kurile Lake – bountiful bears, and stupefying scenery.
10. Near the southern tip of the peninsula – the Kambala and Koshelyovsky volcanoes.











# Arrival

Our plane slowly turned above Avacha Bay – nose toward Kamchatka’s main city, tail out in the direction of the North Pacific Ocean. All passengers – given the good weather – had their noses up to the windows, since the views out of them were sensational (and we hadn’t even arrived yet – nice positive omen of things to come:). Out the windows on one side – the near-perfect cone of Vilyuchik volcano; and on the other side – the three volcanoes that dot the northern skyline above Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky: Kozyolsky, Avachinsky and Koryaksky.

Incidentally, the airplane is the main mode transport in Kamchatka, since there are still neither road nor railroad links with Siberia. The climate is extremely changeable and mostly harsh and inhospitable, and there are very few populated centers. In general: very remote (not that I’m knocking that: more remote = less tourists:). Have a look on the map yourself – let me guess: for the first time in your life?!

We land – practically as far ‘east’ as possible before you get to the ‘West’ (next stop – Alaska!). The airport is Elizovo Airport – around 20km from Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. We disembark, then there’s a bit of pushing and shoving at the world’s shortest baggage carousel – upon which they load several hundred bags from a jumbo Boeing or Airbus. Hardly an encouraging ‘welcome to Kamchatka’ gesture, but at least they’re building a new airport (‘shaped like a volcano’ apparently), so let’s hope there’ll be less pushing and shoving there.

If you’re an organized tourist visiting Kamchatka for the first time, you’ll definitely be met by your travel agency rep. If it’s not your first time, some locals you became friends with on previous trips will invariably meet you. Either way you’ll be given tasty treats upon arrival! These will be the regular Kamchatka staples: super-fresh fish, caviar, crab. And newbies really do need to try Kamchatkan sea urchins: they’re small, very prickly... and very tasty. Not that all newcomers do try them, but they really should: the Japanese say they prolong life, after all (not that we ever found out for how long).

Next – the inevitable ‘raid’ on the local fish market: strolling, perusing, licking of lips, then a bulk purchase of the freshest of seafood delicacies. Then it’s back to ‘base’ – a basic yet wonderful hotel built amid thermal hot springs in the small village of Paratunka on the other side of Avacha Bay from Petropavlovsk.

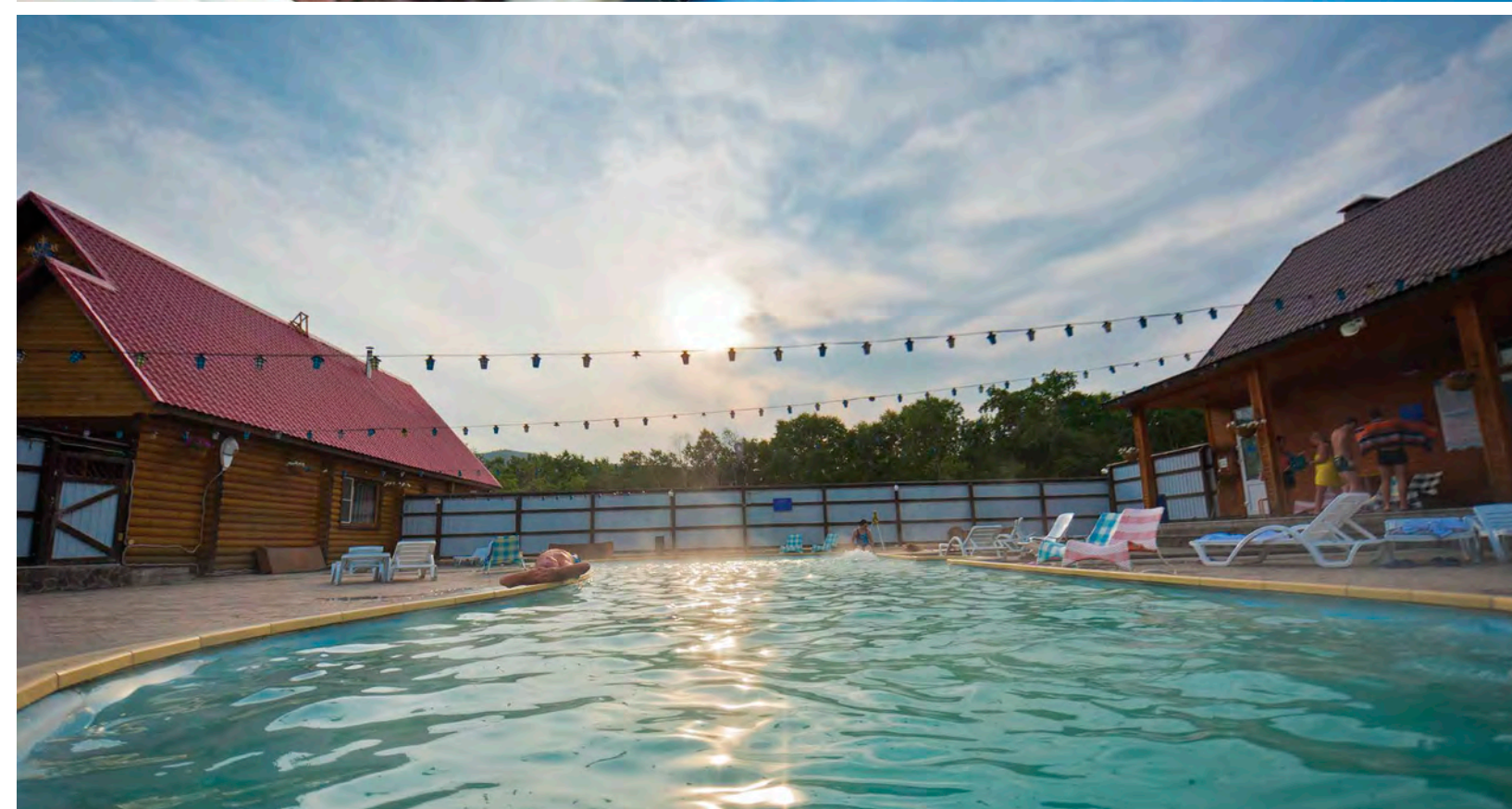
Ok, so the hotel is hardly a Four Seasons, but that doesn’t matter; the main thing: the temperature and freshness of the water in the thermal pools – two or three different ones of varying levels of warmth. You just pick the temperature that’s right for you ).

The main task for the rest of the day: to stay awake until nightfall so as to then conk out come evening – local time. No sleeping before then! Otherwise de-jetlagging can take... several days! Hardly much fun those days will be either.

And tomorrow – we set off. Tourists, guides – and a chef! – all with backpacks containing provisions and other essentials will all squeeze into an all-terrain people carrier, and the adventure begins!...









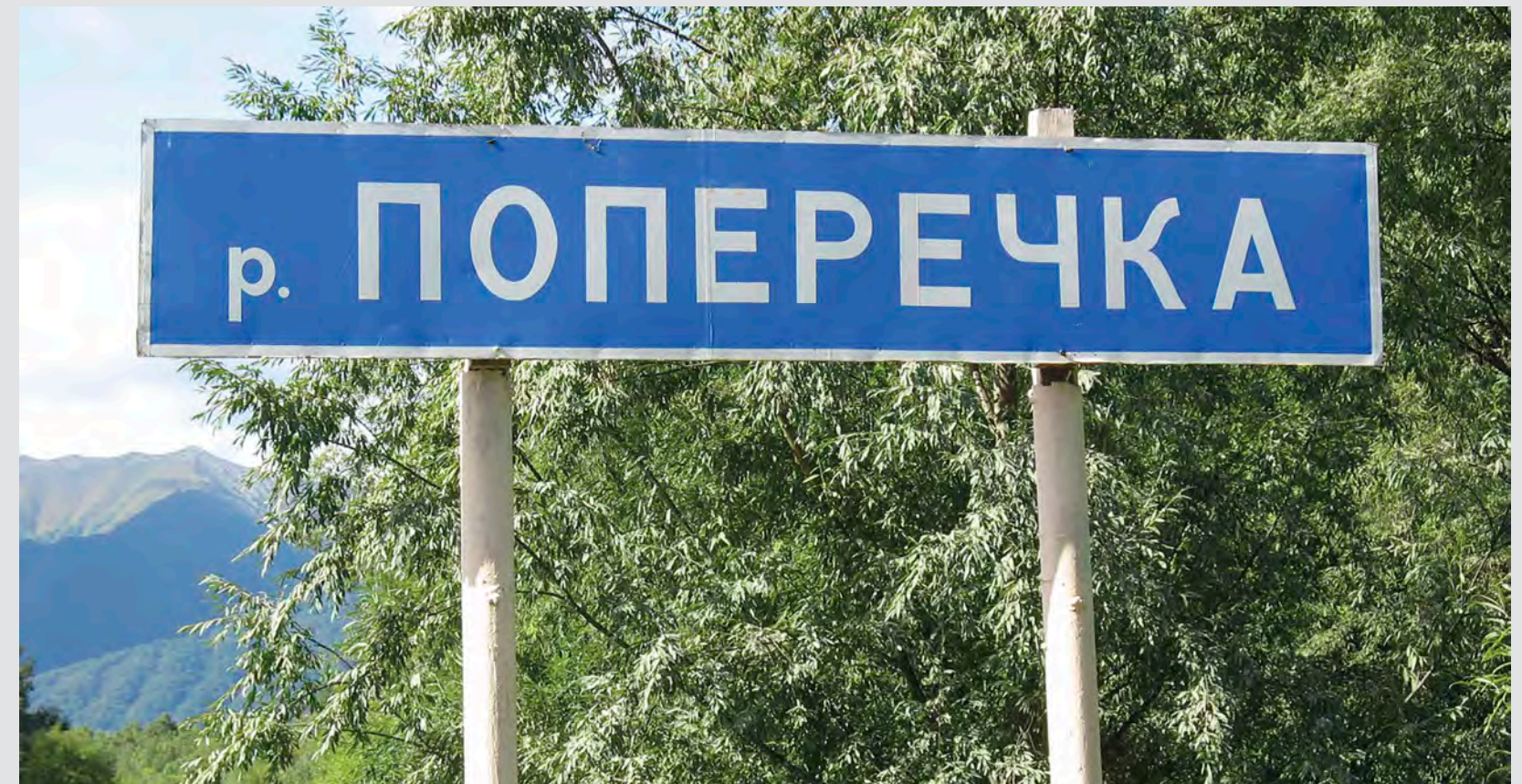


# Kamchatkan place names

No one really seems to know for sure where the name 'Kamchatka' comes from. The mostly likely origin is from the Itelmen language. One version states that it's from the word *Kamchalyoh*, the Itelmen for their neighbors – the Koryaks. This to me seems likely: the word Kamchatka sounds typically pre-Russian influence, just like many of the names of rivers and volcanoes – Apacha, Opala, Ksudach, Tolbachik. Although... hold on: there are some Russian words that are in fact similar – there's *perchatka* – glove.

There's the 'chik' suffix which is added to some male first names to make them affectionate-endearing-familiar-diminutive (e.g., Adamchik, Vovchik...). But then Opala sounds Finnish! In short – origin: unknown ☺.

Among the clearly Russian-origin place names there are plenty of colorful ones: there are the streams named 'False', 'Greasy' and (like above) 'Vovchik' (Vladimir > Volodya > Vova > Vovchik!); the rivers named 'Double-handed', 'Thievish' and 'Sinful'; the volcanoes named 'Scorched' (*Gorely*) and 'Cloudy' (*Mutnovsky*); 'Dangerous Canyon' (*Kanyon Opasny*); and so on...





# Heading south!

Gorely and Mutnovsky – the Scorched and Cloudy volcanoes – were first on the menu as we headed out in a southern direction...



Mutnovsky volcano  
(aka – Mutnovka)







# Mutnovka

The Mutnovsky and Gorely volcanoes are just 50km south of Paratunka, and as such are normally where tourists first head after arriving on the peninsula – after their obligatory spot of bathing in the thermal pools, that is. However, the road isn't asphalted! Still, it's not so bad: the soil-and-stone mixture used as a surface instead is firm and reasonably smooth the whole way (apart from a few awful stretches – as in the pic over the page).

It takes two hours to reach the volcanoes in a truck-cum-bus people-carrier. You could make it in just an hour in a specially adapted off-road vehicle with huge wheels, but since the road track is hardly a smooth autobahn, I'd advise you give that option a miss.

DRIVER BEWARE!  
Before descending [down this track],  
think about who will pull you out  
[of the mud] if you get stuck!



That there pole I'm leaning against isn't a utility pole. It's one of many poles that indicate where the track is under meters of snow in the winter. Look how high it is!









Mutnovsky volcano is one of the most grandiose, fantastical places on the planet. As such, a walk around the colossal crater of this old but still very active volcano is mandatory. There are the extraordinarily bright and varied colors, the constant bubbling and hissing sounds, the boiling water that's spat at you and the hot steam that drenches you (all of this right next to snow and glaciers!), and there are the sulfuric fumaroles that stink to high heaven! The dimensions and proportions of the scenes are simply mind-bending. Hellish beauty.

I mentioned the bright colors... but they're not just of the rocks; streams too. Check this one out: it starts out grey-yellow, then it flows under rock and comes out a bright grey color! Magic! But how? Well, if you decide to risk being boiled alive and get closer, you can just see under the rock how there's a veritable volcanic boiler hard at work there. The water runs through the boiler – much like a gas water-heating boiler in a home – and in the process gives streams a different color.

However! You need to behold this only when it's very sunny. And it's not very sunny here very often. So you need to be very lucky too!







In a corner of the old crater there are a couple of newer, smaller craters. One has a turquoise lake in it at the foot of ice-and-snow-covered slopes; the other is super fresh and very active – having erupted, I believe, in the year 2000.











In general Kamchatka isn't big with tourists as it's so remote and the weather's so bad. However, here at Mutnovka you can expect to see at least a few other walker-tourists trekking round the crater. Which got me thinking: I wonder if anyone has ever climbed up to the top of the volcano? I'm simply curious in case we have a couple of days of clear weather next time...









From the main crater of the volcano a stream runs down a canyon, which eventually turns into a waterfall some 80 meters high. A stunning sight to see: amid sheer cliffs of multicolored volcanic rock down the water plunges, literally into the unknown – for the end of the waterfall is hidden under snow! You can stare at just this for hours; imagine how many hours – or days – you need to ideally fully ‘inspect’ Mutnovka as a whole ☺.



A kilometer further down there's a second waterfall, but we couldn't see it. Over millions of years the stream has bored out an extremely thin, deep canyon, and unless you're right at the top of the cliffs either side of it you can't see all that far below. I'm sure there's at least one good vantage point for this second waterfall but, alas, we weren't shown it. Next time!...









**From the 2010 expedition diary**

*At last! Finally a long-held dream has come true: climbing up to the top of Mutnovka in good weather, opening a bottle of good whisky with friends, and gazing at the surrounding otherworldly scenery. Monumental. Mind-blowing. Euphoric. Warrants regular return visits, no matter how remote and tricky to get to – especially in warm summer weather when most of the snow has melted and you can get almost to the foot of the volcano on wheels.*







To get to the volcano in summer when there's still plenty of snow about you need the sturdiest of specialized off-road vehicles. A tank? Ideal ☺. Seriously, it's always good to have a back-up vehicle not too far away, say – a newish Kamaz truck (the kind they do the Paris–Dakar Rally in). In our case, the ancient triple-axled 'Ural' truck we were in got stuck in the snow and we had to call for assistance. Where's a spare KAMAZ when you need one?



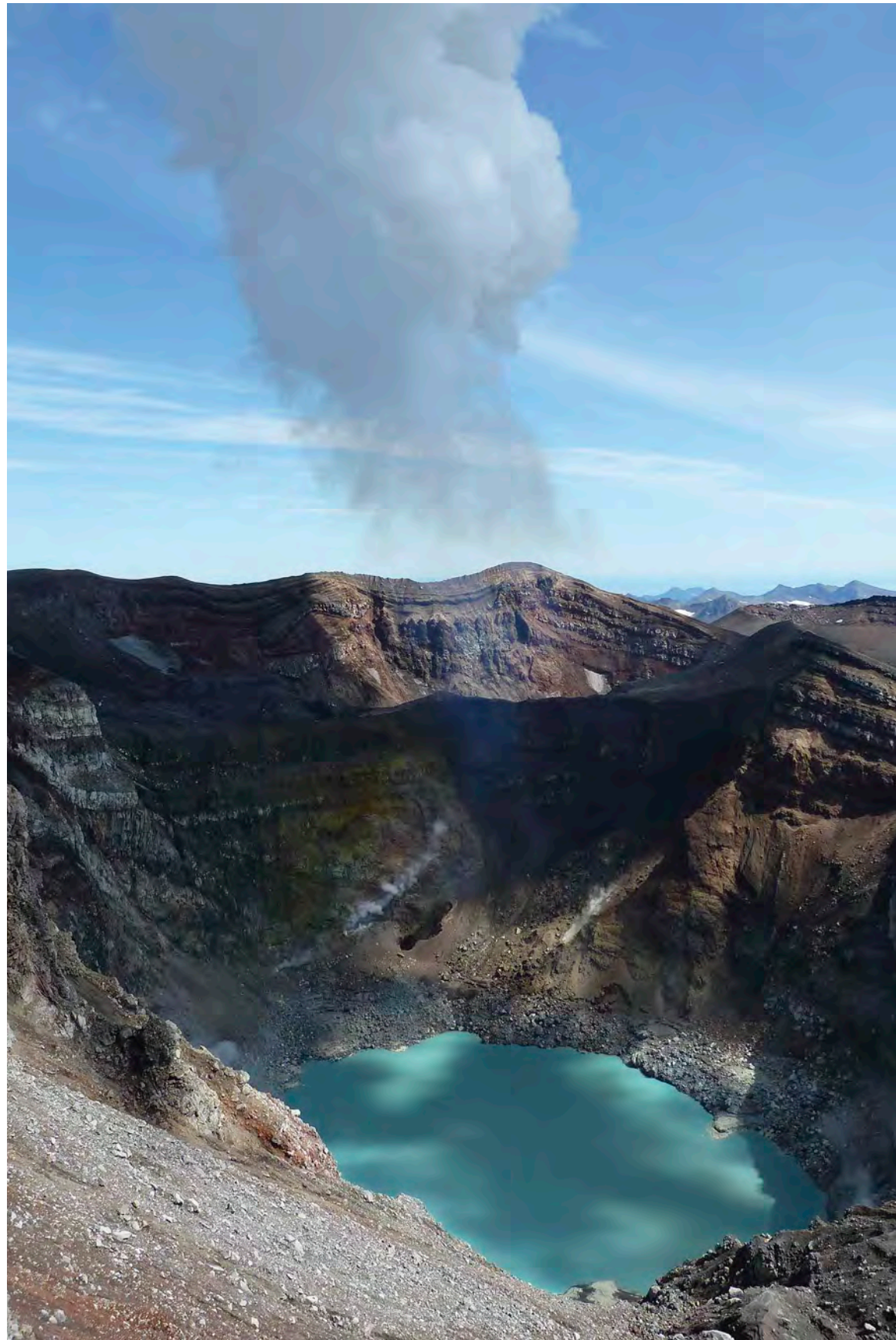
# Gorely

Gorely is about as grandiose as Mutnovsky, but on the whole rather a different beast compared to its neighbor. At the top it features two otherworldly colossal craters that form a giant figure-of-eight. The first is filled with a dark-blue-colored lake; the second, at least in the past – a bright turquoise one.

Alas, since 2010 the second crater has been emitting gas actively and the lake has almost completely dried up. These are signs that lava is getting very close to the surface and the volcano will soon erupt. Accordingly, best not inspected up close anymore. Still, I have been lucky enough to see it in different seasons down the years, and each time the lake's size and color were different! What it will look like next time and into the future is anyone's guess.







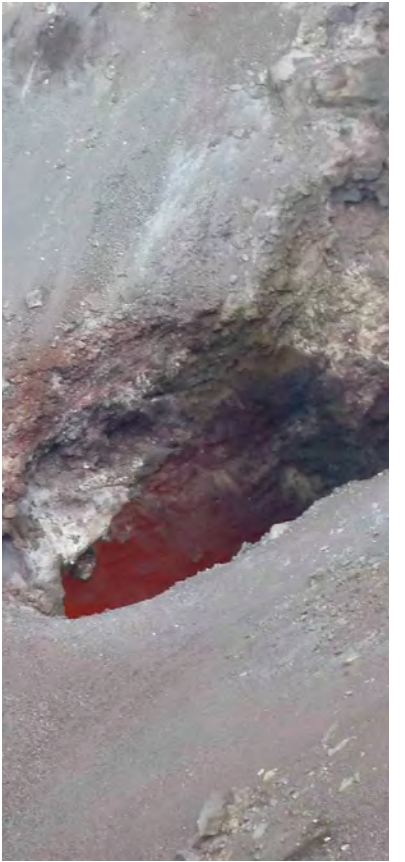
The outward appearances of active volcanoes are most unpredictable – and that includes the lakes that fill their craters, as typified by Gorely here. The lakes in the two huge steep-sided craters of the volcano appeared only at the end of the 1970s (which in ‘volcano time’ is no time at all). And over the three decades that followed the lakes were ‘colored in’ in various shades; then the volcano started to emit scorchingly hot gas, and the colored lakes in the craters became real shallow. The blue lake’s color faded; the green of the other has remained, but it too has become very shallow (at least that was the case when I wrote this). And that’s just how it goes: alas, volcanic beauty doesn’t last long. Looking at it another way, every time you revisit volcanism there’s always something new. Glass half-empty, or half-full? ☺







2010: in the second crater, ultra-hot gas was being given off in various places (so 'red'-hot it turned the rock crimson!); meanwhile the lake was fairly disappearing







In 2012 we managed to see only the first crater; the second was shrouded in thick, impenetrable cloud



In 2015 the green lake had completely dried up and disappeared







But even without lakes, Gorely is still gloriously grand. Volcanic brutality – check; colossal craters – check; striking shapes and forms – check. And anyway, I'm sure the lakes will be back – if not the two in the two large craters, then at least in the other, smaller craters that keep appearing, which, according to volcanologists, number today more than 30 on the main cone of the volcano.

A stroll along the top rim of the craters is highly recommended. The going isn't easy – the volcanic rubble underfoot is loose, uneven and crumbly – but the beauty all around makes up for that: it's just so overwhelming! So as not to get lost, I recommend going round clockwise; that way it's easier to choose the right path.











**From the 2008 expedition diary**

*Having gotten up to the very top of the crater of Gorely volcano, each of us uttered... an expressive aphorism. It went like this: the trekker-climbers reach the top one after the other. And as they got there, each blurted something along the lines of 'oh my god Gorely / woah / no waaaay / awesome, etc.', since the view of the crater literally comes into view all of a sudden!*







All around Gorely there are endless lava fields, caves and tunnels, and all of these volcanic features are real close by so you get to see a good quantity of them without having to walk too far. Eons ago – around the time of the appearance of the first standing primates – streams of lava flowed here. These streams hardened at the edges – eventually forming fissures, which then gave lava tubes; then everything cooled and set, and the liquid lava flowed out. The result is a volcanic subway system. But the subway tunnels come in vastly varying sizes – from so-narrow a cat wouldn't squeeze through one, to colossally cavernous corridors.

Btw: there are lava tunnels like these all over the world. In Hawaii there are even underwater lava tunnels (under the Pacific Ocean), which experienced divers swim down.

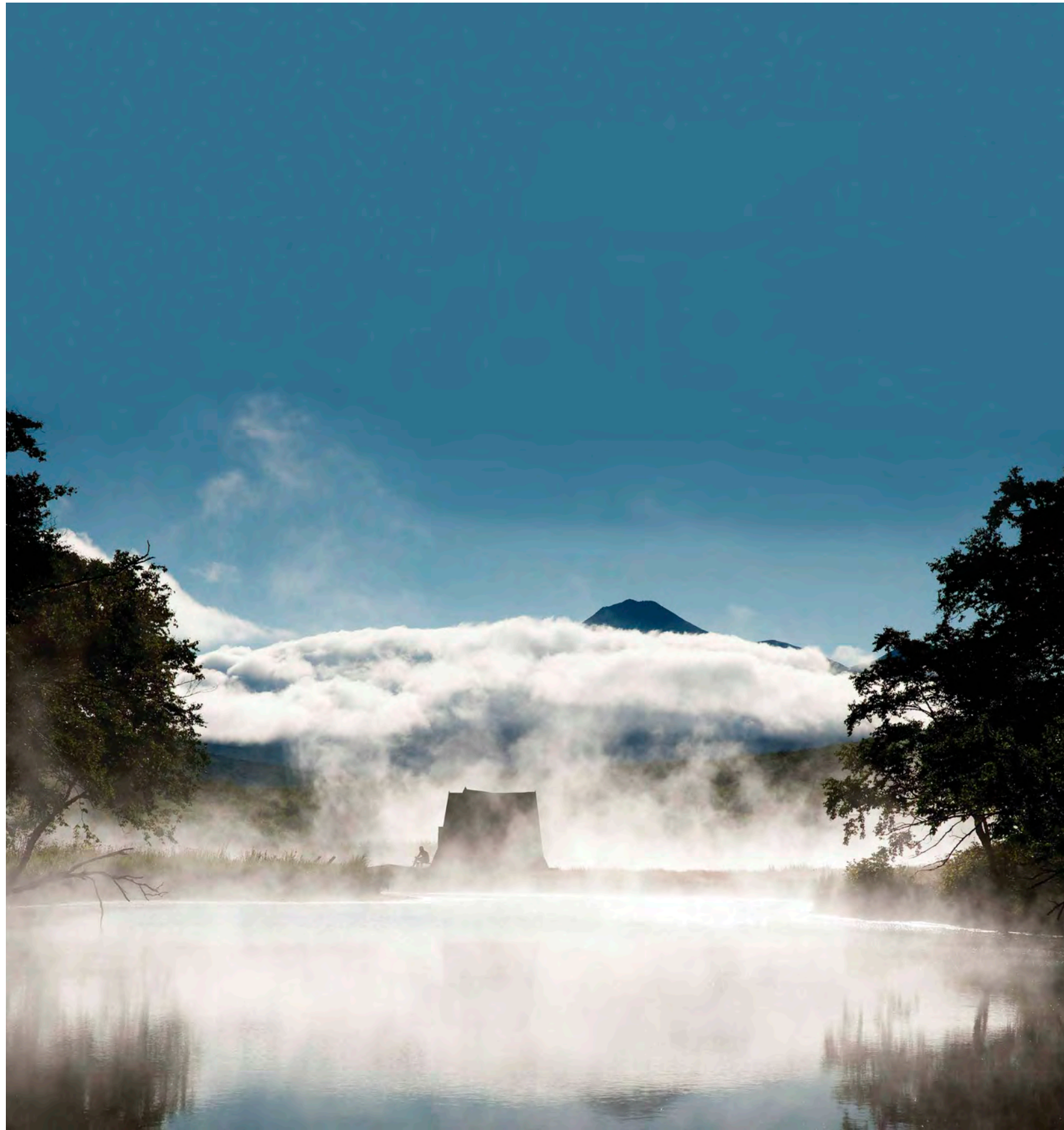




If you ever do come here to check out Mutnovka and Gorely – as I obviously recommend you do – you need to make sure the weather forecast promises clement weather for the day(s) of your visit. Otherwise – you really shouldn't bother. If it's overcast and rainy you'll see nothing much at all of either volcano. You've been warned!







# The thermophiles of Khodutka

Now, I've seen many amazing places around the world, yet I still don't think I'm being too bold by saying that the hot springs near the Khodutka volcano are among the *most* amazing places on the planet. In short: must-see. And they're not too remote either: 120km directly south of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatka, and 50km southwest of Gorely and Mutnovka.

The Khodutka hot springs (or, to be more precise, the Khodutka hot lake; length – 400 meters, width – 30-70m, depth – up to two meters) are said to make up the biggest underground thermal water outlet on the

surface of the planet, and they emit around 80 to 100 liters (some sources on the net go up to 200) of piping hot water a second! That's plenty to keep the temperature of the water of much of the lake around 40-45°C. Which can be frustrating when you'd like a nice cool refreshing drink of water or a cold swim – there's no cold H<sub>2</sub>O round here at all ☺. Still, you can go for a hot swim... well, no – it's a bit too hot for any swimming, but you can sit and slowly move about in the 43-degree water for a time, if you really must (and you've the healthiest of hearts:).

But the best bet if you really do need a dip in the water (and who wouldn't?!), is to find a spot further away from where the hot water is pumped into the lake, where the temperatures are much more comfortable. Even more comfort comes from there being changing cabins and a wooden path, steps and bridge. Still too hot? You simply walk along the bank a bit further and enter the lake 'wild' – unassisted by the man-made infrastructure.







And there's 'comfort' for the eyes too – from the elegant Khodutka volcano next door, and also from *Priyomish* – Foster Child! – the name of the smaller volcano next to it!



The only things that swim in the hot water are the only things that can survive in the hot water – thermophiles. And before you Google that, let me tell you that thermophiles are bacteria that love having very hot – even boiling – water as their habitat. And apparently they're very... beneficial (but I never quite found out to what or whom:). And they look this:







I've bathed in the hot lake here next to Khodutka several times already on separate occasions. But one thing I've yet to do is climb to the top of Khodutka itself. I was always either too tired, or it was too rainy, or I was just enjoying the warmth of the hot springs too much to opt for such a challenging ascent instead. Oh well, as I've said many, many times about many, many such lapses – it's not so bad: it simply means I'll just have to get back here (and finally crack Khodutka:)!...





# Some like it hot...

Hot springs – amazing things! Indeed, a fascinating topic...

Here's what I found out about them on the net – in addition to what was already in the far reaches of my memory.

The largest 'hot' lake in the world is Lake Hévíz in Hungary; however, its water is hardly hot at all: +34°C in summer, and a paltry +26-30°C in winter. So maybe I should write 'Lake Hévíz is the largest tepid lake in the world'?!

In Italy there's the Terme di Saturnia. The temperature of the water is around +38°C, and it's suitably Lamborghini under the hood too: 800 liters a second, plus wonderful waterfalls. The area of the water surface I didn't get to find out, but judging by the photos, it's a Fiat-500 size wise.

In Iceland there's the Blue Lagoon (which I visited in 2015). If we're to believe Wikipedia, the temperature of the water there is +37-40°C, though I sure didn't come across any +40 – and I did look for it. The lake is relatively small too, and it's man-made: it takes in processed water from the neighboring geothermal power station!

Still in Iceland there's also the Deildartunguhver hot spring (oh those Icelandic tongue twisters!) with a speed of 180 liters per second, but the temperature of the water in it is most certainly not suitable for swimming: +97°C!!

In the Dominican Republic there's Boiling Lake, but it's also too hot for a dip: +80-90°C.

In New Zealand's Waimangu Valley there's Frying Pan Lake, with a more human-friendly temperature of +55°C, which has been quoted – incorrectly – as the 'largest hot spring in the world'.

And on the Kuril island of Iturup there's a hot river + hot waterfalls + hot swimming pools, all with a water temperature of 42 degrees: perfect!

So, to summarize:

| Lake            | Area (m <sup>2</sup> ) | Water consumption per second | Summer water temperature |
|-----------------|------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Hévíz           | 47 500                 | 450                          | +33°C                    |
| Frying Pan Lake | 38 000                 | 110                          | +55°C                    |
| Khodutka        | 18 000                 | 115                          | +42-45°C                 |
| Boiling Lake    | n/a                    | n/a                          | +80-90°C                 |
| Blue Lagoon     | Small                  | Controlled                   | +37-40°C                 |
| Iturup          | Stream                 | n/a                          | +42°C                    |
| Saturnia        | Small                  | 800 (sic!)                   | +37,5°C                  |

So, everything above +50°C doesn't count, since death – be it slow or quick – is guaranteed. No thank you. Less than +40°C also doesn't count as that just ain't hot. So where does that leave us?

Yep, turns out these here Kamchatkan Khodutka hot springs are the 'best' in the world (Iturup's hot river coming a close second) – according to both Professor Wiki and Professor Kaspersky! I have to say: I didn't see that one (Russia taking the two top spots) coming.

So there you have it – the best hot springs in the world. Not bad, eh? Not that you'd need an extra reason to want to visit Kamchatka, but it is a pleasant bonus all the same. And I mentioned they're not too remote. Well they're close to yet another must-see Kamchatka gem too – the undeniably unique Ksudach volcano, which is a mere ~30km directly south of Khodutka. Btw, getting to Ksudach from Khodutka makes a really good trek: it's a bit longer than as the crow flies – ~40-45km – but the going is easy all the way, despite the somewhat dense forest most of that way. But I'll tell you about that separately...



# Ksudach

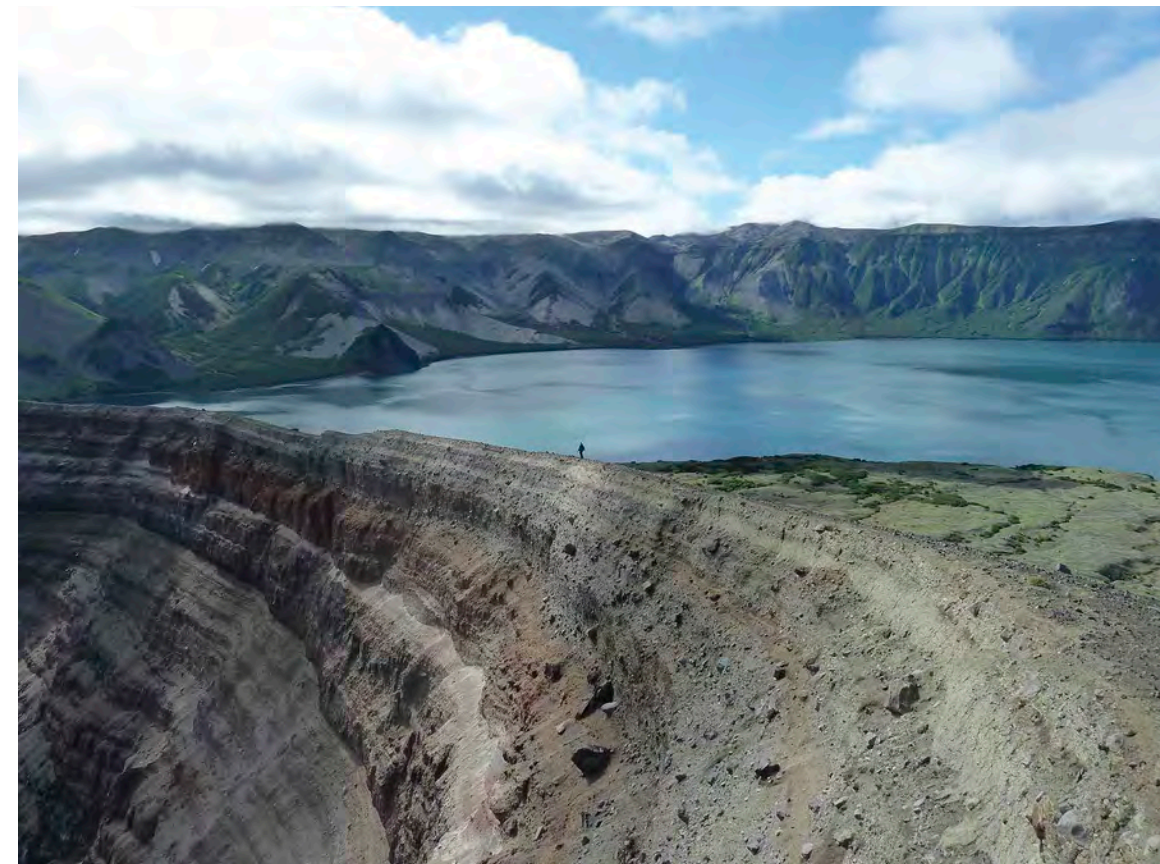
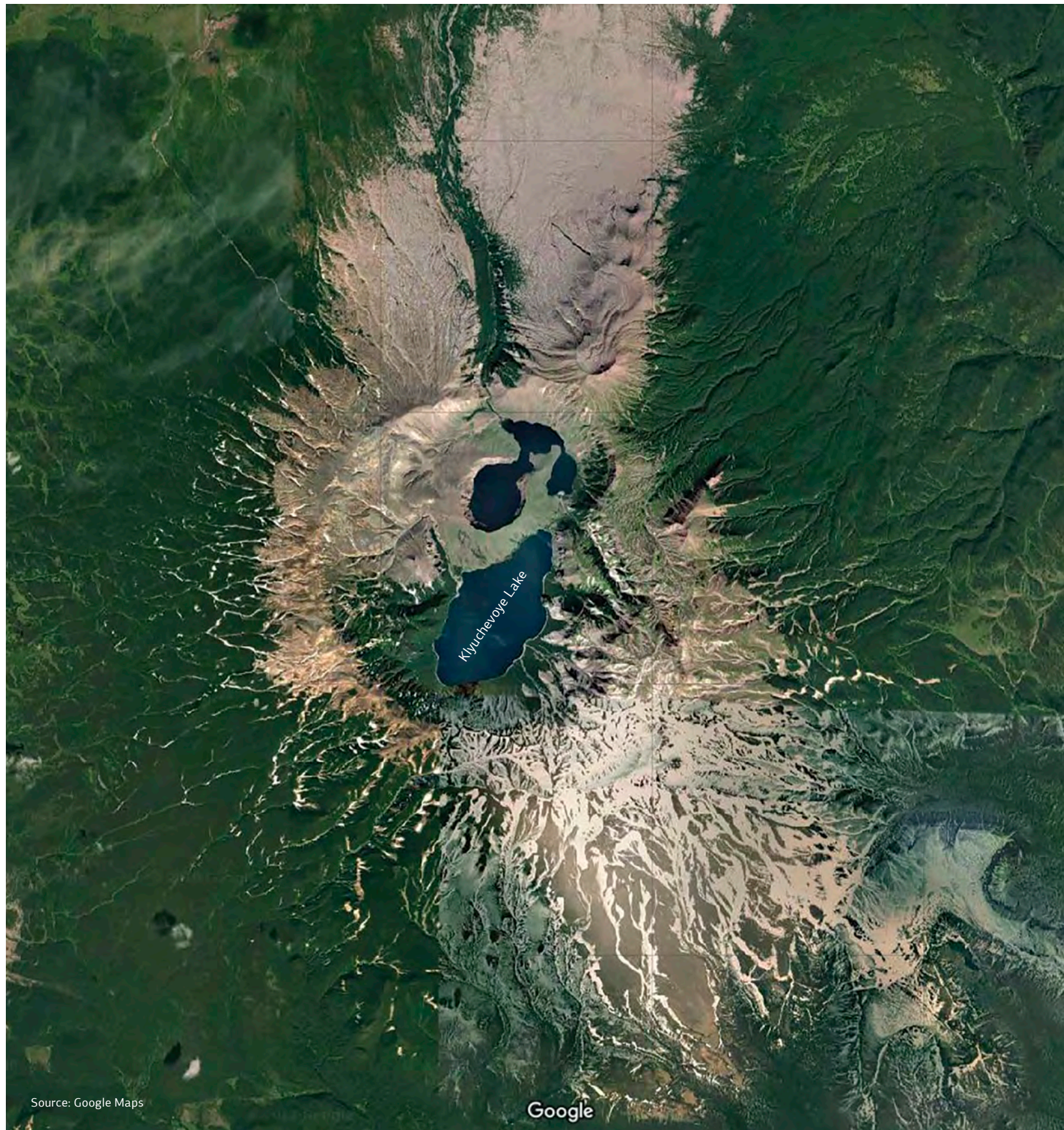
This volcano is yet another of the most breathtakingly beautiful places on the surface of the planet, which also happens to be situated on the Kamchatka peninsula.

Ksudach is a volcano within volcano; or – to be more precise – a volcano within a crater-caldera left over after the collapse or explosive eruption of an older volcano.

It features two lakes, with hot springs dotted along the sandy bank of one of them (=hot *beach!*). Thus, you get a double-whammy: off-the-scale picturesque panoramic views you can stare at for hours + DIY spa treatments!







Just try to imagine the scale and power involved when a volcano that was seven (7!) kilometers in diameter one day blew its lid! The hole left behind is clearly visible today from outer space, and (talking of space) resembles a huge lunar crater. The cone inside the crater sports a crater of its own some 1.5km in diameter.

Some of our group figured they'd be able to throw stones as far as and into the lake from the ridge-top of the crater. Naïve! For they were fooled by the lack of a sense of scale and proportion – a kind of trick on the vision: it's actually some 200 meters down to the lake below, which works out at around 100m on the vertical axis. The only way a stone can make it down to the water is if it's a big one – more of a boulder – and its rolled down the loose rubble covering. Btw, the crater is called Stübel Crater and the lake inside – Stübel Lake – after the German geologist-volcanist Moritz Alphons Stübel.









# About the bears...

Here's a curious thing: all the best viewing points along the top rim of the crater are populated with quite a few... grizzly bears! But why?

Some of the group reckoned they appreciate the views just as much as humans, so come here when in need of a spot of meditative rest and recuperation after all the fishing they do. Well it is one theory. It's not as if they're here for the salmon or berries – there's none of either.

Another original – crowdsourced – theory arose after we'd trekked for quite a bit: in some places that top rim can be warm underfoot... and then it clicked – en masse, as if by telepathy: “they're here to warm their toes!”

And not just toes: they dig out little ~~sunloungers~~ burrows for themselves to lie down in for full chillax mode, which in a way dovetails back to the first theory – they're here for the contemplative down-time. All very mindful and modern. And it turned out that, despite the lack of berries and fish up here, they can still grab a bite to eat: we saw a lonely bear upend a large rock lying on the ground and grab everything wriggling under it and proceed to eat it for supper!





No matter how extraordinarily naturally beautiful Ksudach is, its tourism infrastructure is... non-existent. No, wait – there is... a communal spade, but that's it!

No hotels or hostels or other places to stay, no shops, no roads. Much like... Greenland, or most of it. But not to worry – you just bring tents with you. Who needs a hotel anyway when you can pitch said tents on a constantly warm beach? 😊





# Dig!

The lake in the caldera here is unique in that, while most of the water in it is *brrrrrr*-cold, along one bank (handily, a sandy one), as mentioned, there are near-boiling (60–70°C) hot water springs that bubble up under the surface, which make the sand simply too hot to walk upon. But a mixture of the two waters – the bracing and the boiling – now that’s something that can be worked with. What you do is simply take the spade (more on it in a minute), and start digging by the water’s edge to construct a pool into which you pour some hot and some cold water until you get just the right temperature for your bathe!

Normally such a pool is dug first thing upon arrival – even before the tents are pitched, as running a nice hot bath is easier that way: the water in the pool starts to heat up instantly from the volcanic warmth seeping up through the sand, so you don’t need to add so much cold water.

I mentioned ‘the’ spade above. I’m referring to the ever present Ksudach-spade with its long, naturally-bent handle made out of a sturdy tree branch. I’ve visited Ksudach’s hot beach several times already and the spade is always there, without fail ☺.





Primitive – perhaps. Does the job – for sure!



So – zero tourist infrastructure here: you get it. The upside: zero other tourists.

In all my several visits here, we only ever saw one other group sharing this beach with us. Well, that one group once, and also the odd group of tourists choppered down onto the beach; they have a walkabout for half an hour or so, no bathing – certainly no long treks around the lake or up Ksudach – and then it's back into their helicopter. Where's the fun in that?











# Ksudach sunsets

The original landscape of Ksudach gives tourists a presentation of color that's one of a kind.

In this photo: the upper band of shade comes from the shadow from the clouds; the lower shade – from the top edge of the caldera opposite. And, given good weather and if viewing from quite high up, the lake becomes divided into areas of light-blue and dark-blue water. What's more, these large blobs of different color change shape in rather rapid fashion, with outlines and contours morphing and appearing and disappearing over and over. How this occurs – I've no idea. It must be some kind of parallel world peeking through when it thinks no one's looking. Or something like that.



**From the 2008 expedition diary**

*This place is simply unreal. Especially at night. Silence, no wind at all, and no one around. Just us – inside a volcano, or up on the top of a volcanic crater.*

*There are the vertical columns of steam that rise up above the lake's surface – from emissions from hot springs underneath the lake.*

*There are the sudden small waves that appear on the lake – despite there being no wind whatsoever! Where do they come from?!*

*Then there's the lake's water-level falling several centimeters: where does all the water go?*

*In short, it all feels a bit unreal – a bit like the Stalker in the Zone in Tarkovsky's movie. Eerie. Unforgettable. And silence.*











In the northern wall of the caldera running water has carved out a canyon, through which a small river flows, which starts out as a lake. Around 1.5km down from the lake said small river falls off a cliff in a similarly small but very pretty waterfall. But it's no ordinary small, pretty waterfall: it's a double-decker! Part of the water falls from an upper stream (off the cliff, as is typical of most waterfalls), but another flow has dug into and under the volcanic plate below the river bed, which comes out half-way down the cliff to join the upper flow.

Getting to the waterfall ain't easy: its surrounding area is thick with substantial overgrowth that would need hacking at to scramble though. But there is an alternative: you can hover up above the waterfall in a helicopter, which provides some super photo ops.





# Full circle around Ksudach

Ever since my first visit to Ksudach, there was one thing I longed to do: to return one day and pull off a full trek around the rim of its colossal caldera.

Our first attempt ended well short of the full circle: mostly due to inexperience, we only covered around two-fifths of it. We didn't quite realize just how great the distances were, we didn't know the best direction to go in, we didn't know which particular routes to take across the many crevices along the way, detailed maps simply don't exist, and – perhaps most importantly – we didn't get up early enough! I mean – we're hardly ones for sleeping in till lunch, but still, for Ksudach – you need to be up and at it with the larks.

For a first go you really need to go anticlockwise, since it's clearer which directions you need to take going that way. On our first attempt we went clockwise and... kinda got lost! Not that that first bid was all in vain: it turned out to be a useful reconnaissance mission. For it proved to us – among other things – one key fact: you need two days to complete a trek around Ksudach crater. That might sound like tough going – two days of trekking in the middle of nowhere and having to carry everything you need (especially water) on your backs. And it is quite tough. But that doesn't make the trek around Ksudach any less must-do, as it's just so off-the-scale awesome in terms of the views you get in both directions: looking into the crater and outward (you even get a glimpse of the Pacific Ocean along one stretch of the route).

Then one year, finally, my dream came true! We actually made it: the complete Ksudach crater – fully circumnavigated! It was hot and sticky, the local *insectorate* was of a particularly vicious bloodsucking persuasion, and then... our water ran out. It could have ended so badly... but we pulled through – hurray!





Magical, mind-blowing, monumental – such are the views all around you for the full two days while trekking around Ksudach. Outward – vast panoramic views of the Kamchatka peninsula with volcanoes of various shapes and sizes dotted about here and there as far as the eye can see, the ocean on the horizon, endless volcanic slag fields, and the odd patch of snow and ice. Inward – the constantly changing perspectives of the crater and lake. In short – mesmerizing!







With a diameter of approximately seven kilometers, Ksudach has a circumference of around 22. But don't be fooled by that when trying to gauge the distance you'll be covering and the time you'll take to complete a rim-walk: there are all the ups and downs you need to take into account too, plus there are the treks getting to the crater from the camp and then back again afterward. In the end, door to door – rather, beach to beach – it works out at around 35 kilometers. Quite a distance, and you're up and down like a yo-yo. Not easy!

'Maniacs!' exclaimed our guide, Denis, at the start of our trek.

'How many times have you been around the rim?' we asked him.

'Never. I've never led psychos before,' came the reply. 'But it's a good route. It's possible, passable, doable – should there be any lunatics to be found who'd be nutty enough to hike it,' he added.





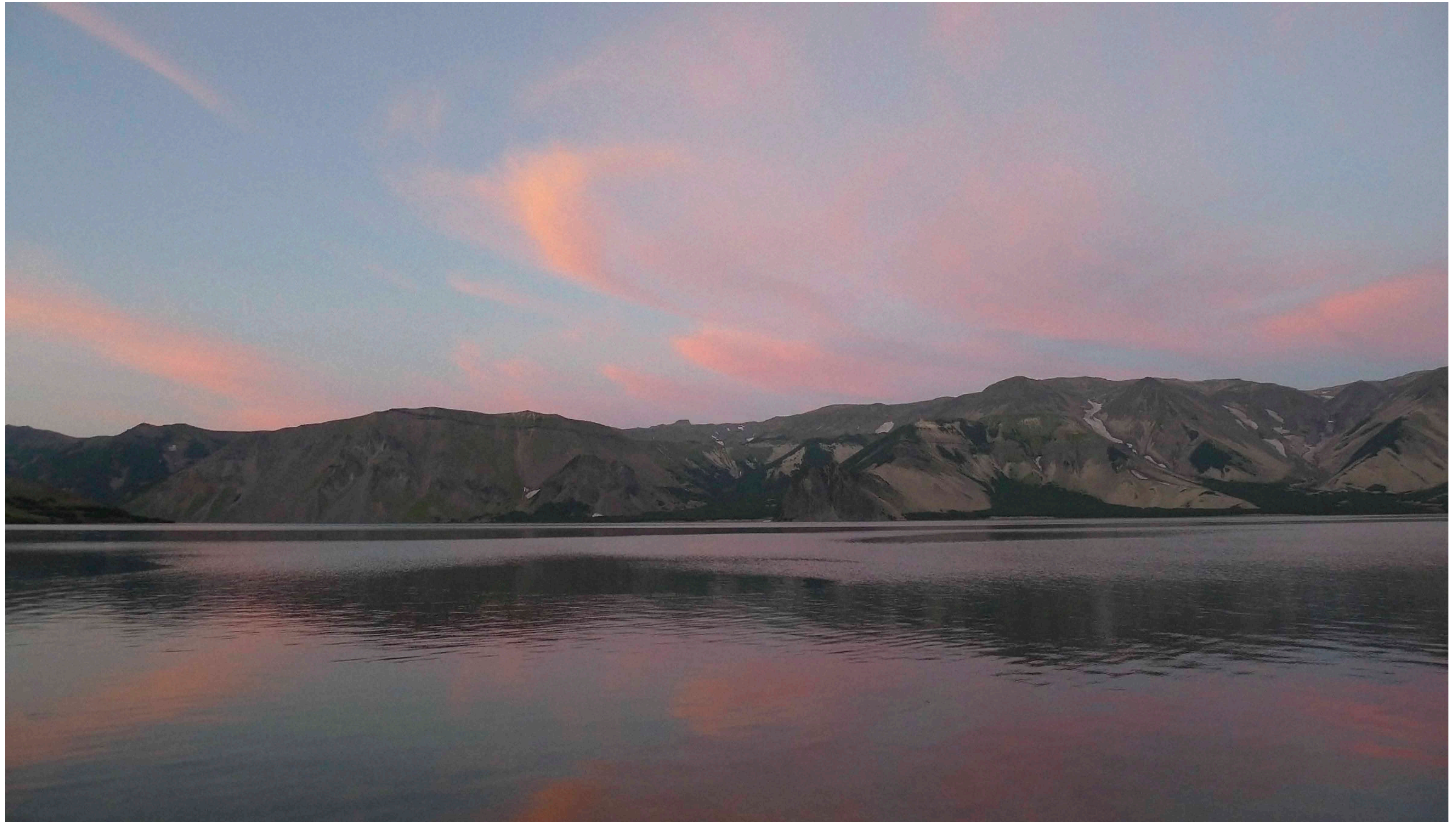
**From the 2012 expedition diary**

*'A very cool trek, but mostly – absolutely pointless!' wrote one of the posse in our travelogue-diary.*

*'It was as if we were on Mars! The views – cosmic, with red earth; and us – Martians!' someone else added.*

*Another comment: 'Cool!!! Cool!!! It's something to remember for the rest of my life!'*

*I agree with all the comments: Cool, pointless, and monumental. I'll add: magical. And I want to go back again!*







The route we took can be completed in a day – without backpacks, with an earlier start, and knowing the route beforehand. But we... went loaded up, set off late, and sure didn't know the way – making the route up as we went along! Which I guess would have been fine, but it sure did make wading across a small river at dusk more difficult: a pain at the best of times – worse when very tired and in the twilight.

If you want to lie in (till dawn!), and you'll be stopping all the time for photos – it takes two days. Just remember – there's not much drinkable water to be found along the top of a caldera! Also (again), you can get lost in the ravines if you go around the crater clockwise (as we did). I therefore recommend going anticlockwise.





# Talking – about walking...

As you'll have probably noticed, I'm very into my walking, hiking, trekking – whatever you want to call it. Up mountainsides – preferably volcano-sides – through forests, down valleys; up to several days at a time, checking out all the surrounding beauty, taking pics thereof, and then sharing them with fellow admirers of all things naturally beautiful in the world. And to make such walking (and snapping) experiences all the more pleasurable, excellent paths/tracks/trails are needed. Of which there are plenty around the world...

For example, I really liked the following:

- Routeburn Track, New Zealand;
- Torres del Paine, Patagonia, Chile. They say that the Argentinian part of Patagonia is also awesome;
- The mountain paths of the Incas, Peru (haven't walked along them myself, but did see how they crisscross the mountains around Machu Picchu: MUST get back there; next time with a backpack);
- The Mount Kailash Pilgrimage, Tibet.

And I've heard about other rigorously radical routes:

- Tour du Mont Blanc – France, Italy, and Switzerland;
- The Haute Route, France and Switzerland;
- The Narrows, Zion Canyon, Utah, U.S.A.;
- Kalalau Trail, Hawaii.

And the path around the rim of Ksudach's caldera is also up there with the world's best. It could well even top the list of the 'world's most scenic paths', if one exists (if not, maybe I'll draw one up one day). Stunning, moving, crazy, astounding.





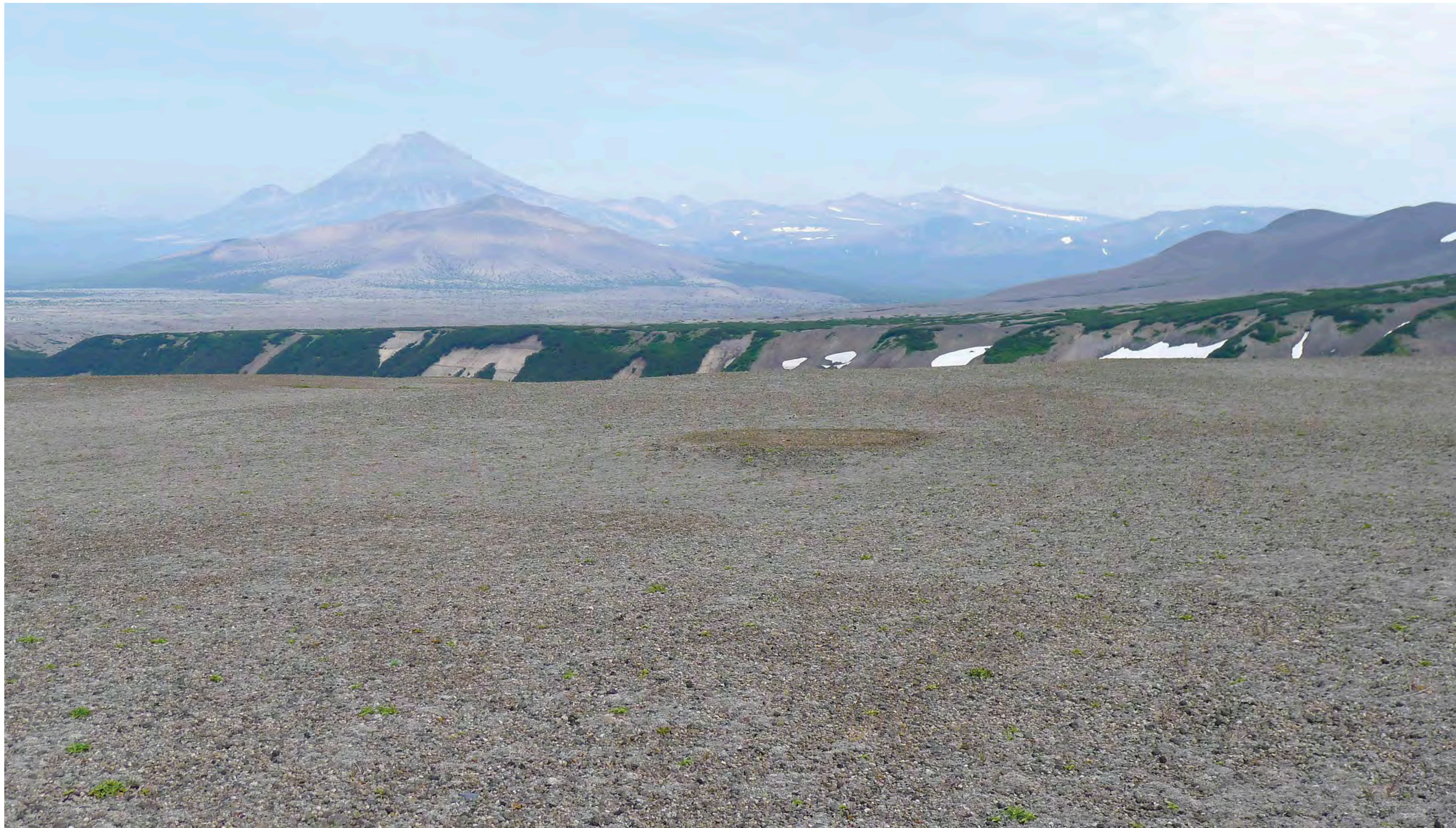
# Next up – Kurile Lake or Khodutka volcano? The choice is yours...

And for those for whom a couple days of walking is too little, I recommend after Ksudach to either head north – up to Khodutka volcano and its hot lake (that's a couple days on foot, two-and-a-half max; distance: 40–45km), or south – to Kurile Lake (that'd be 80km – four-five days, more difficult terrain, and you also need to procure a permit beforehand, for it's in the territory of the Kronotsky Nature Reserve).

I haven't done the route Ksudach > Kurile Lake yet (saved for later), but the one up to Khodutka – several times, and it's a wonderful walk! Plus it comes with a bonus at the end – hot springs. Here's Khodutka on the horizon.







The walk to Khodutka is a wonderful one. No one around whatsoever, only the vast expanses of undulating, volcanic scenery: peaks and valleys and 'Martian' lava-slag fields – featuring the odd bear path! It's also not a test of resilience, willpower and stamina like Ksudach; the going is easy all the way: at first a slight incline, but then mostly downhill or flat and with only a few small crevices to navigate.



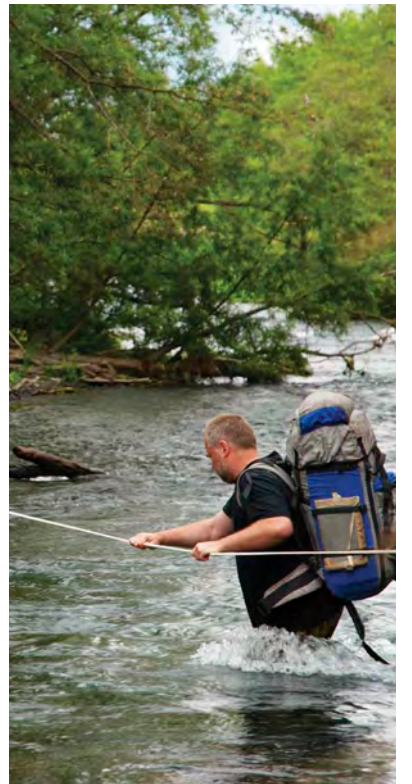






On the first of the two days it took us to walk to Khodutka we covered some 20 kilometers. No great distance, true, but, if you're ever planning on walking this route yourself, make sure to take some drinking water with you, as there's not a drop of H<sub>2</sub>O to be found anywhere all day – no rivers, no streams, no other bodies of water. Still, thirst is a good motivator, we found: it upped our tempo markedly that's for sure; and at our destination our collective thirst was truly Saharan.

On the second day we walked 25km across fairly even, mostly forest terrain, with a few shallow rivers to navigate across. Many a berry was picked, many a huge mushroom too; and thankfully, not too many... bears came to have a look at the strange visitors – just a few. Still, there was nothing to worry about: they were not hungry at all after dining on the finest fresh salmon all morning ).





### From the 2012 expedition diary

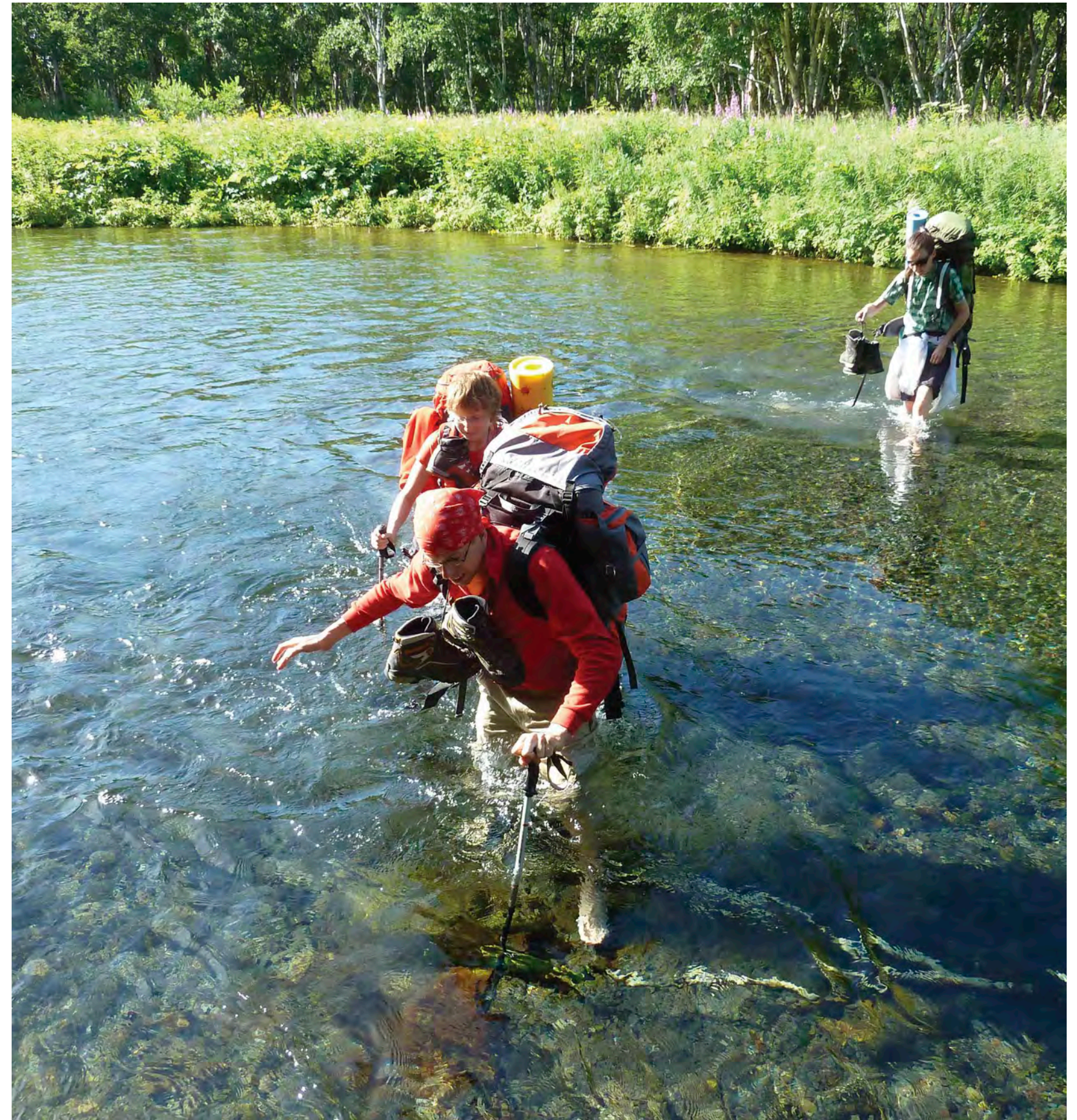
This was the hike-route during which the pen-pushers among us – who maybe had **never** walked with a backpack over rough country before – found out the hard way... what it's like to walk with a backpack over rough country – for miles and miles ). It will be interesting to see if they sign up for the next trip here ).

'In a couple of days we'll walk from Ksudach to Khodutka,' I announced to everyone.

After said walk, the habitually desk-bound made entries in the travelogue-diary of the expedition like this one:

*'Tough – that's the word used to describe the journey on the metro to get to the office each morning. Ksudach to Khodutka – this requires a different word.'*

I couldn't work out what they were moaning about! Is it that my regular gym sessions have paid off in upping the stamina?







Like I've said, the route can take two-and-a-half days to cover, but you can easily do it in just two – if you go in the right direction (note: there are no paths here – besides bear paths:). But how do you know which is the 'right' way? For those interested – have a look at Appendix 2 at the end of this book.



**From the 2008 expedition diary**

*'What's the difference between a stream and a river? You can jump over a stream, or merrily cross it by fording. Crossing a river is much trickier, and sometimes you've no idea whatsoever how to attempt it. We went Ksudach – Khodutka – Verkhne-Paratunka natural hot water springs, and we we'd spend much of each day working out how to cross, and then actually crossing, the rivers. Newbies took their boots off; seasoned expeditioners didn't bother, figuring that in half-an-hour they'd be wet through anyway. Only the very lucky didn't get their feet wet on a crossing (see photo:).'*

*Today we passed a bears' lair! Though it's summer and they're not home – they're out and about – all the same your heart misses a beat! A little further we stumbled across some MASSIVE mushrooms of various varieties – white, orange-cap boletus, and birch boletus. And they seem to get bigger and bigger every time we come here. They're so big now that AB commented: 'They'll soon be so big they'll turn carnivorous!'*

*It was as if we were crossing rivers all day – and getting stung by wasps. Then it started to rain. Then we made it to the sandy "Bears' Beach", covered in their paw prints. All in a day's trekking Ksudach – Khodutka ).'*







# Excerpts from the expedition diary

...covering the trek Ksudach – Khodutka – Asacha – Verkhne-Opalskiye springs

## Day 1.

The trek to Khodutka was like a walk across Mars; there's no other way to describe it. We ate snow (there were no streams most of the way), and we clambered across slope detritus to avoid the thick shrubbery. The first night we spent in a forest on the shore of a stream – among invisible bears and visible bear tracks. As if to add to our disquiet, we observed how our guide, Denis, poured vinegar over the bushes surrounding our camp, and then tossed the odd firework into them too. And no – it wasn't to stop insects biting us, but a very different animal!

## Day 3.

The drizzling rain that began yesterday just wouldn't stop. And there we were – trekking through wet forest, becoming more and more wet ourselves – and more and more miserable too. We just want to get to the hot springs at Khodutka as quickly as possible, where we'll warm ourselves and sooth our aching muscles in the spring water. Things are getting a little desperate after all: the whisky ran out two days ago; the caviar – three days ago. The only place we'll be able to get in fresh supplies: at the hot springs, still a long way away. And still the rain wouldn't stop!...

## Day 5.

### **Dreams do sometimes come true...**

Last time we were here we only had a few hours at the springs and it was overcast and rainy. We'd dreamed back then of one day returning in sunny weather to be able to see the volcano against a clear blue sky. Well this time the dream came true – the cone of the volcano peeked out from behind the clouds and we were treated to a clear viewing thereof for a full 20–30 minutes. We also saw our shadows for the first time in a week. [Added later: Who knew that the next time we'd see them would be back in Moscow?] Then our 20–30 minutes were up – down came the curtain of fog and cloud, and that was that – show over until our next Kamchatka trip...





**Day 6.**

Rather – the ‘Day from Hell’. Still drizzling or raining. Still dampness everywhere, still squelchy underfoot. And when we thought it couldn’t possibly get worse... we arrived at the spot we were meant to spend the night, but it turned out that the stream there had dried out! In all this rain??!! So we had to turn back and walk a couple kilometers – under heavy rain now – until we found another suitable spot. On the positive side, today we saw our first bear, phlegmatically grazing on berries. He lifted his head briefly, only to lower it again to continue his feast. Phew!

**Day 7.**

More rain! More walking in the rain! Soaked to the skin. Crossing rivers. Having to scramble over dense thicket. A mountain pass named Beastly (Zveriny)! A couple bears – mercifully not hungry (what if they had been?!!). Somewhere to the right – the invisible Asacha volcano. Another night in a clearing not best suited to camping (but beggars can’t be choosers, and at least it had the mandatory stream – with water! – next to it!). That’s all I want to say about this day. Heck, even the vodka we procured didn’t cheer us up!

**Day 8.**

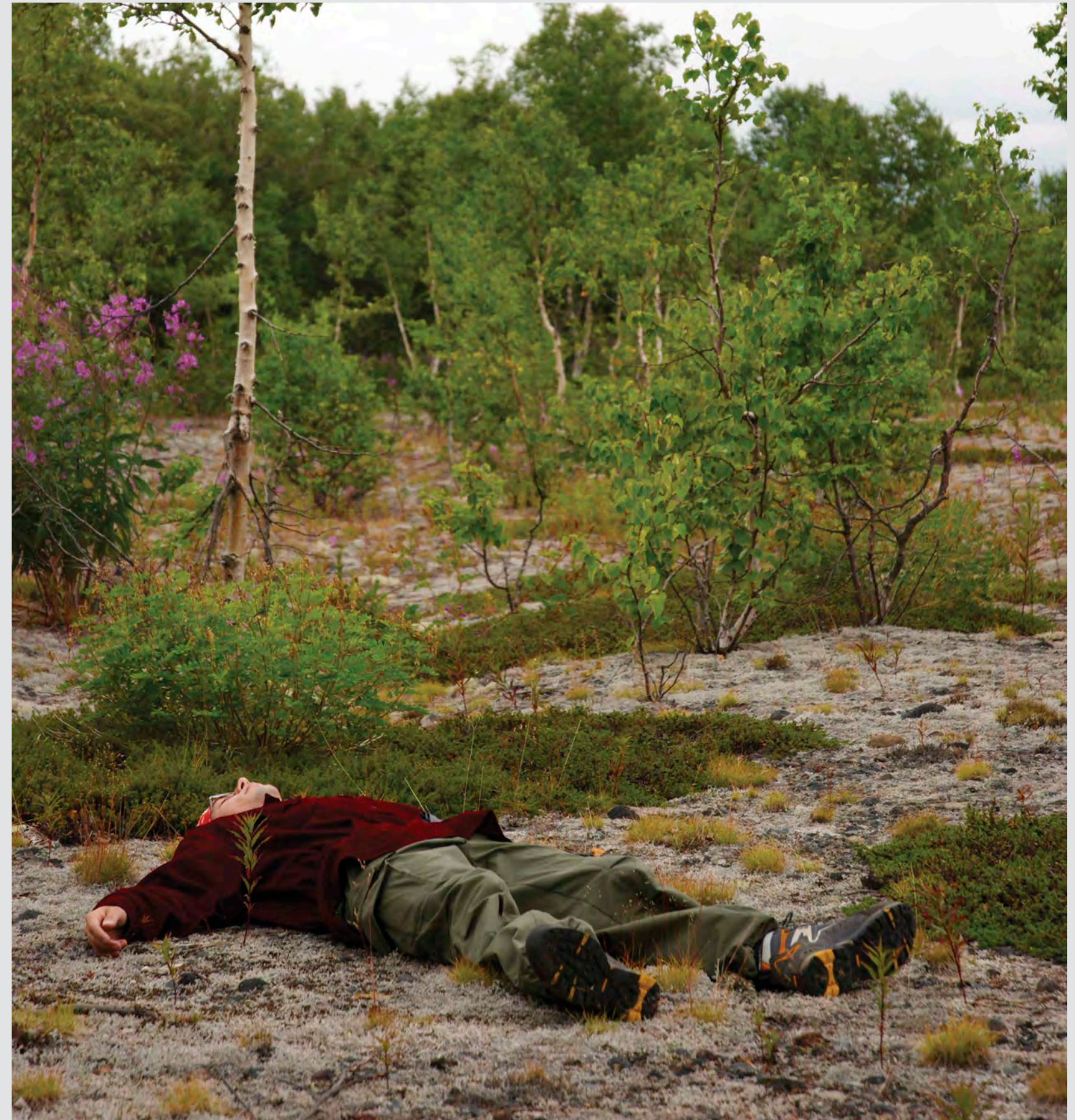
Capitulation. We decide to give up – and not continue this wet-walk to the very end. We use the satellite phone to summon the chopper. We walk to the nearest place it could land. We board. We fly – to somewhere nearer civilization...

**Day 9.**

We spend most of the day bathing in the natural hot springs; in a word – aaaaaaaaah. We inspect and admire the bear tracks all around the springs. Do they go for the spa treatments too?!

**PS:****No regrets!**

Despite the incessant rain, the bizarre lack of water in the streams, the bloodsucking insects, our aching legs, the rations running out, and so on – no regrets! And indeed, no one really had any ).











# Weather and climate

The weather in Kamchatka is unpredictable, as you'll have gathered by now. In the morning it may be clear and bright with not a cloud in the sky, but come lunchtime an impenetrable damp fog can bring visibility down to a few meters, and of course it may rain cats and dogs. Then, late afternoon, a wind can blow up and shoo off the clouds and fog, and it's back to the clear, sunny day again!

This makes knowing what to wear somewhat tricky. Best bet is to be ready for any and all kinds of weather – dress as per how it's looking in the morning, but also take with you garments for other kinds of weather scenarios in the afternoon – and preferably more than one set. On our regular Kamchatka expeditions there are two taboos. Experience has shown that any comments made about the weather, or – more importantly – any mention of 'sun cream', always brings on rain! Thus, neither the weather nor sun-tan lotion are ever mentioned: their utterance is strictly forbidden. Code names or other alternative wordage is used instead.





# The terse wit of our guide, Denis

Denis, one of our main guides, also on vacation (from his job at the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations), is a bit of a Bear Grylls. He'd do the map-based navigation for the group, light the campfires, pour vinegar around the perimeter of our camp (to ward off bears), and man-handle the heaviest of rocks. And from time to time he'd also entertain us with his deadpan, straightforward answers to our silly questions. Here are a few examples:

'Denis, how far have we walked already today?'  
'We haven't even started!'

'Denis, how far are we planning on walking today?'

'Are you sure you want to know? Are you certain you'll feel better with that knowledge?'

'Denis, where are we?'

'Around here.' [Points to an area on the map some 30 kilometers across.]

'Which way do we need to go?'

'Ahead.'

'Denis, how much does a bear weigh?'

'200 kilograms.'

'200 kilograms doesn't seem much.'

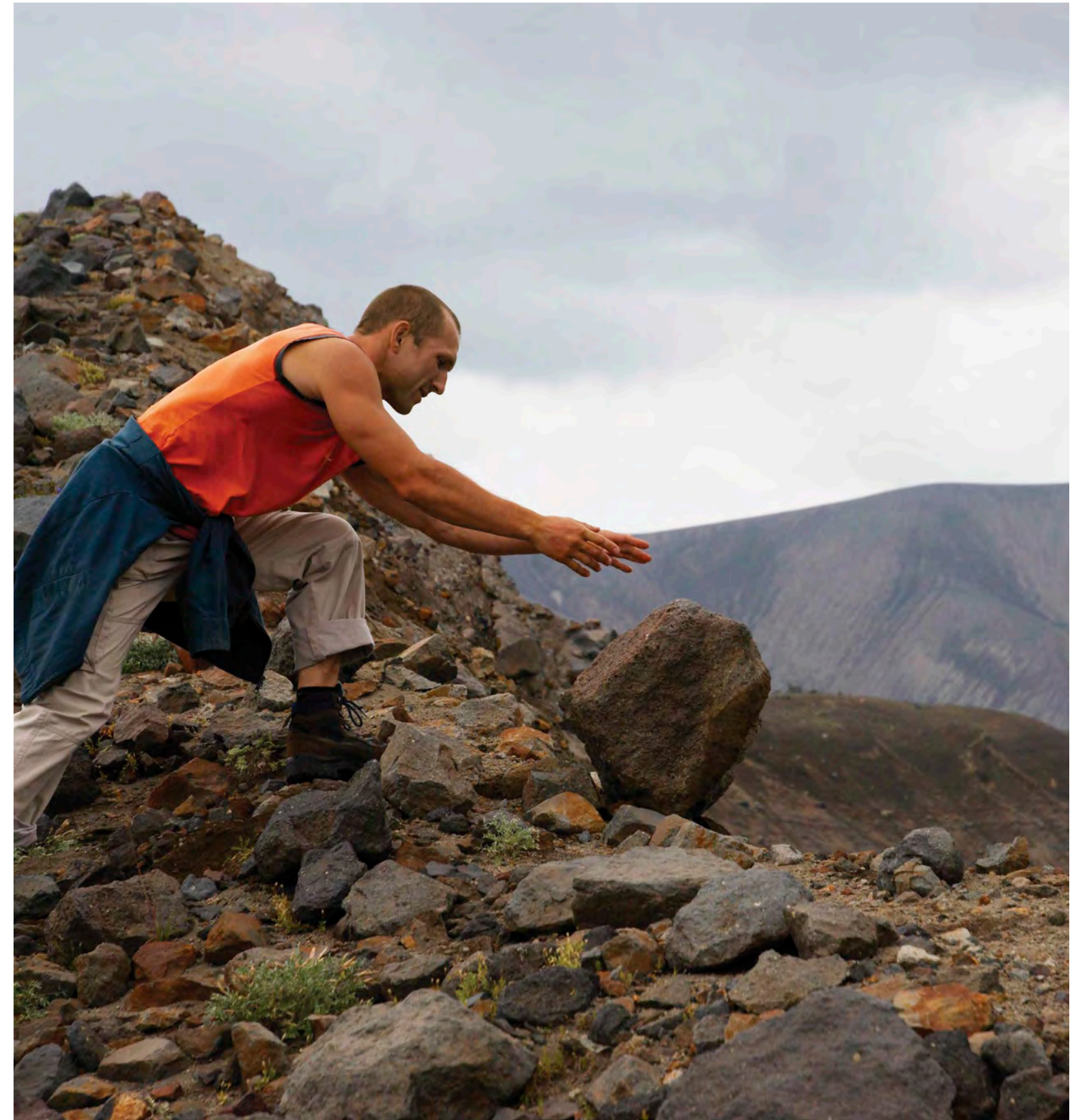
'Ok, 300 then.'

'Denis, will there be bears there?'

'Do bears \*\*\*\* in the woods?!!!'

'Denis, can we eat these berries?'

'The bears eat them.'





# Glossary

## Geyser

Periodic out-gushes of naturally hot water from out of the ground, with each out-gush lasting no less than a minute. If less than a minute – it's not a geyser but a 'pulsating source' (at least in Russia). What it's called if it lasts precisely one minute isn't clear.

## Gorod (city)

Curiously, locals in Kamchatka never refer to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky by its actual name; they call it simply *gorod*, meaning 'the city'. The reason? There's only one 'city' in Kamchatka; all other settlements are towns or villages or smaller.

## Caldera

The Spanish word for cooking pot or cauldron, adopted by plenty of other languages – including both English and Russian. In volcanism, it's a pot-shaped cavity of a considerable size surrounded by slopes. Usually has a flat base. Formed principally from a catastrophic explosion or as a consequence of a volcano's peak collapsing inward due to the loss of pressure inside the volcano once magma is expelled out of it. Lakes form in some calderas of volcanoes (like Ksudach and Uzon), while some are filled with seawater (for example on the Greek island of Santorini).

## The mainland

The Russian mainland to the west of Kamchatka. A term commonly used by locals, since Kamchatka is a geographically isolated peninsula. You can only get to it by airplane or ship; no rail or roads connect it to the nearest 'mainland' city of Magadan.

## Snezhnik (snow patch)

A patch of snow that remains long after most of the snow cover has melted – like, in August! Tends to be dense, moist, and with a wavy surface. Up in the mountains and volcanoes they are partly covered in black dirt. *Snezhniki* are clearly visible on many photographs of Kamchatkan landscapes.

## Fumarole

An emission of hot volcanic gas out of the earth's surface. Fumaroles go from weak – slowly emitting a light fog, to very active – venting powerful gas streams. They have a distinctive smell of sulfur or hydrogen sulfide; some smell simply revolting! Sometimes the earth's surface around a fumarole is covered in a layer of yellowish sulfur.

# How to walk from Ksudach to Khodutka in two days the right way

You come out of the caldera to the left of the stream – even though to the right of the stream it looks like there's less of a climb. But going to the right is a no-no: that way you soon come to a ravine with loose rock, which you either have to clamber across (sometimes on all-fours), or go around it – above it – which means an ascent higher than the route to the left of the stream. Leftward, there's a slight ascent, then it's flat along the edge of the canyon before you come out onto a plateau. Next – walk along the *Tyopli* (warm) stream.

Getting to Western Khodutka river is easy; crossing it – slightly less so (up to your knees in water). Then you either set up camp for the night on the other side, or carry on as far as the next stream. Crossing the Right Khodutka river needs to be done as late as possible, since on the other side you need to walk along... a bear track! Then you cross fields and through some woodland all the way to the springs.

If you set out earlier (say, 8am) and don't hang about with the river crossings – even a moderately-fit group of walkers will get to Khodutka by daylight (over two days).









Eugene Kaspersky

# Kamchatka: Contrast Country

Vol. II – the South

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I'm a big fan of Kamchatka. I've been all over the world and seen many of its natural wonders, but nowhere on this planet have I seen such a high concentration of natural beauty and unusualness, mixed together in unique proportions with... (i) overcoming practical day-to-day challenges, (ii) mushrooms, (iii) fresh fish, (iv) fresh red caviar, and (v) roaming grizzly bears (full of fresh fish; phew!).

Kamchatka is astonishing, fantastic, utterly unique, and as a result totally mind-blowing.

*Eugene Kaspersky*

**P.S.** In my tales about Kamchatka I often repeat adjectives like *monumental*, *fantastic*, *mind-blowing* and the like. For this I apologize to you, dear readers; but, the thing is – that's just how it is in Kamchatka, and I simply don't know of any other appropriate words. So, like I say, I repeat. Often. For in Kamchatka everything is, indeed... *monumental*, *fantastic*, and *mind-blowing*! It truly needs to be experienced to be believed...

## THE KAMCHATKA PENINSULA

SEA OF OKHOTSK

Karaginsky Gulf

Ozerny Bay

BERING SEA

Kamchatsky Gulf

Tolbachik and the Northern Fissure

Klyuchevskaya Sopka group of volcanoes

Uzon Caldera  
Valley of Geysers

Kronotsky Gulf

Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky

Avacha Gulf

Volcanoes Gorely and Mutnovka

Khodutka

Ksudach

Kurile Lake

Volcanoes Koshelyovsky and Kambalny

PACIFIC OCEAN

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