

Eugene Kaspersky

An Extraordinary Expedition to the Kurils

20 days touring the remote
far-eastern islands



From the author

The idea to go on a long cruise around the Kuril Islands to the east of Russia came to me, for sure, while vacationing on nearby Kamchatka, which I do often. That's my favorite place on the planet for an August 'hard reset': volcanoes, geysers, hot springs, bears and other similarly extreme extremities. But every time I was on Kamchatka the locals there were always saying things like: "Yes, but on the Kurils there's..." or: "we've heard that on the Kurils there's even..." and so on. So my curiosity had been growing and growing for

quite some years – until it reached critical mass and I decided that I just had to get there: that the next annual August reboot-expedition would be to the Kurils.

That was back in 2013, when the preparation for our Kuril trip began – only to end a year later. The 'who's going' was established (friends who are lovers of extreme tourism and intense nature experiences), the optimal route was calculated, the Kuril territory was surveyed, and the

most suitable vessel for the trip was selected. Crucially, all participants were informed that this wasn't going to be pool → gym → beach → pina colada → spa → Cuba libre → paperback → single malt... tourism. This was wild marine-based adventurism in a harsh climate on bleak islands a long long way away. Internet or cell coverage – forget it!

Location: The Kuril Islands

The small islands that form a slightly curved chain stretching between the Kamchatka Peninsula (Russia) to the north and Hokkaido island (Japan) to the south are called the Kuril Islands. The chain is some 1200 kilometers in length, while the land area of all of the islands together is around 10,500 km². In all there are 56 islands; most form the Greater Kuril Ridge, with just a handful making up the Lesser Kuril Ridge down by Japan.

The Kurils are bleak, and in plenty of ways – plain and simple. Extreme weather, poor communications with the continent, a 100% mark-up on all imported goods (and just about all goods are imported from mainland Russia), and a constant threat of natural disasters such as volcano eruptions, earthquakes and tsunami!

The name of the islands comes from the Ainu (language) word for ‘man’, the Ainu (ethnic group) being the indigenous, fast disappearing, people of the Kurils.

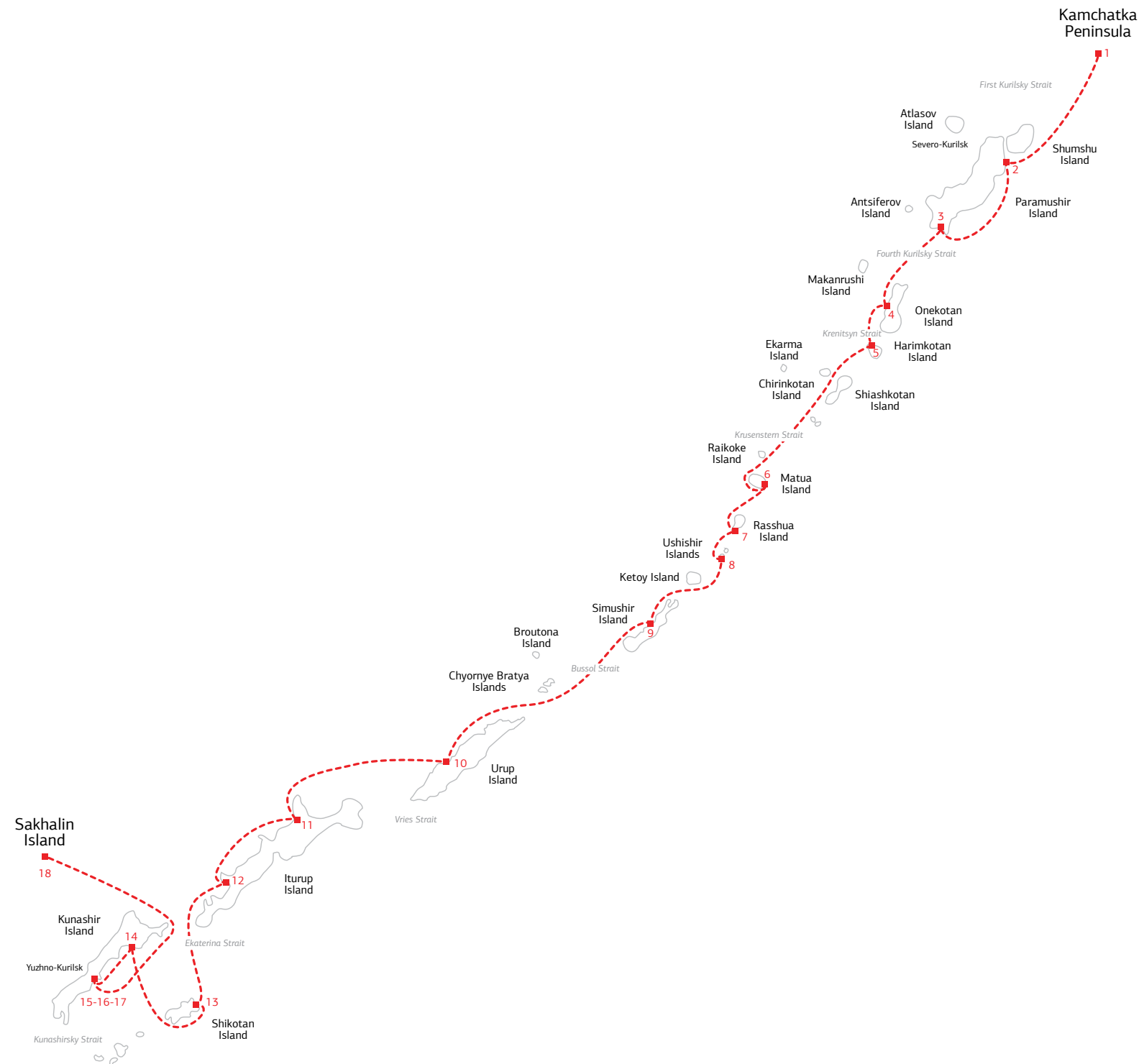
And here’s another curious etymological fact: the name for the Sea of Okhotsk comes from the Evenki name for the river Akhot, situated near today’s Okhotsk port. The Russian Cossacks, getting this far east in the 17th century, russified it to Okhota (‘hunt’), and that’s where the name of the sea comes from. The meaning of akhot – big.



Twenty Days in August 2014

The outline plan for the expedition went something like this: Fly to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. There – onto a small ship, and then slowly cruise round the most interesting of the Kuril Islands from north to south, ending up in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, from where we fly home. In all – 20 days on the road boat, airplane to airplane.

But the actual day-to-day route turned out as follows:



Day 0

Flight in. Cut to the chase with sulfuric bathing in hot springs. Fighting the jet lag.

Day 1

Embarkation onto the boat and off we go! Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky → Paramushir (Severo-Kurilsk). ~350km, 18-hour journey, 10 knots = 18.5 km/h.

Day 2

Paramushir, Ebeko volcano, rain and wind.

Day 3

Paramushir, 'easy' day, lighthouse ruins.

Day 4

Onokotan, Krenitsyn volcano, 30km there and back. The world's most beautiful volcano.

Day 5

Kharimkotan, easy day, walk along the coast. Berries (moss berries, wild strawberries), search for floating artifacts.

Day 6

Matua. On-foot excursion around the island. Rusty steel barrels, derelict military bases.

Day 7

Rasshua. 'Walk' around the local hills 'Hammer' and 'Sickle', rain, and Siberian dwarf-pine. The 'road of death'.

Day 8

Ushishir. Sea caldera, walking through seven-foot-high grass; Arctic foxes and hot springs.

Day 9

Simushir. Zavaritsky volcano's caldera.

Day 10

Urup. Fishing, hike around hot springs.

Day 11

Iturup. Hot river, hot waterfalls. 42°C water (the answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything).

Day 12

Iturup, Atsonupuri volcano. Real tough day.

Day 13

Shikotan, walking, swimming in the ocean.

Day 14

Kunashir, Tyatya volcano.

Day 15

Kunashir, lava columns.

Day 16

Kunashir, Mendeleyev volcano, difficult ascent.

Day 17

Kunashir, Golovnina volcano, hot sulfuric mud.

Day 18

Yuzhno-Kurilsk → Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, 25-hour journey.

Day 19

Seafood market and flying back home.



Our 'vacation' was, to say the least, an unusual one. But that was to be expected – thankfully by all of us. Indeed we were all physically and morally prepared for the trip, for we knew it was going to be tough... but not THAT tough. And not THAT terrible – and amazing at the same time (rather – at different times). Every one of us admitted afterwards it was the single most... contrasting helter-skelter-like 'vacation' they'd ever been on!

Still, for me, the best r&r is when you have severe contrasts: when you combine the overcoming of artificially created obstacles with compensatingly intense and unique positive emotions. All that's sure what we got! It was so good I think we'll have to go back to the Kurils at some point in the future now we've gotten over the debutante's teething problems. However, the unique first-time impressions we'll never have again.

We were often nearly knocked off our feet by hurricanes, drenched with cold rain, and nearly scalded by hot springs. We were violently rocked about on the ship by waves, and forever tripping over loose rocks while climbing up the latest mountainside. For hours we would stare at the surrounding landscapes from the top of volcanos and calderas. The evenings we'd pass singing songs to the strumming of an acoustic guitar. Each day was like a heroic feat. And every morning we'd wake without knowing just what would be in store for us that day: how far we'd have to walk, how easy or difficult it would be, would there be rain and wind or bright sun? Like I say: dizzying contrasts...



The Team

In all there were 20 of us on the expedition – just right, since our ship slept a maximum 20. Each one of us was either a seasoned traveler with an appetite for the unusual and extreme, or a newbie who'd convinced us sufficiently that their stamina was of the required level. In all, a robust team of the able-bodied – as proved throughout the 20-day resilience test: a team that could be relied on for future tough-tourism jaunts...

Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky

Our journey of contrasts began with the Aeroflot flight from Sheremetyevo in Moscow to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. To my surprise the plane, a Boeing 777, was brand new, as in – almost zero on the clock! In all my flying I'd never once been on a brand spanking new plane.

Now, if you fly in to Petropavlovsk from Moscow, it's best not to do much at all on the day of arrival. There are eight hours between the two cities so the jetlag can be a killer – even for more experienced travelers. And it's best of all 'not to do much at all' in Paratunka, which isn't far from Yelizovo Airport (around 30km) or Petropavlovsk (50 km).

In Paratunka each hotel has its own thermal springs and swimming pools, each with their own temperature norms. I've stayed at quite a few, but my favorite is the Hotel Helios.

This is a former Soviet holiday camp, with the menu – and service – still very much Soviet to this day. Really, the place is awful; but one thing makes up for all its shortcomings: each cabin has its own mini-swimming pool with fresh hot-spring water in it! These are just perfect for spending an evening in with a few friends round, nibbling at the fresh seafood and sipping the local mineral water and beer (both beverages being very... volcanic, and exceptionally tasty).

The hotel also features two larger pools for everyone's use. These, too, are highly recommended for dipping into.



– Как водичка? Нормально?
– Геотермально!

Cuisine on the Road

I reckon I should start a new 'column' on my blog on gastronomical revelations from various corners of the world. In fact, yes, I'll kick off such a column right here in this book.

So here we are – the first installment of my gastronomical mini-guides to dinner-table food furnishings from the furthest reaches of the planet: No. 1: our dinner table in Petropavlovsk-

Kamchatsky, where we spent the day before setting off to the Kurils...



1 & 2 – Salmon caviar.

Fresh out of Petropavlovsk fish market. Spread copiously on fresh white bread with lashings of butter, washed down with Kamchatkan beer – perfect. You can pick up a whole kilo of the stuff at the market for a mere 900–1200 rubles (\$13–19)!

Incidentally, you may think salmon caviar is all the same, much like non-Eskimos think all snow is the same. However, salmon caviar can come from many different types of the salmon species. Examples: Chinook salmon, pink salmon, chum salmon, sockeye salmon, coho salmon, Siberian taimen and trout. The locals on Kamchatka can easily spot good caviar, as well as what particular type of salmon it comes from – instantly! For me though – it all tasted great, no matter what sort.

We were told that in 2014 there was a poor caviar harvest: the salmon was apparently reluctant to spawn. As a result only the pink salmon on offer was guaranteed fresh – from this year's harvest. This is the type we went for, eventually managing to get through around 30kg of it between all 20 of us!

3 – Crabs!

You can buy them fresh – like, alive fresh – straight out of the aquarium. They can be put on ice immediately without being filleted, or you can have them cooked right there and then put on ice. In the latter case, once home you just leave the crab-on-ice to thaw out for up to an hour and it's ready to be photographed eaten!

A kilo sells for around 2000 rubles (\$30), but you've got to watch out – if already on ice you may end up paying for the ice that comes with it!

4 – Dried smelt.

The females are considered far superior to the males – and are priced accordingly. One sign in the market shouted: 'Only females!' Price: ~600 rubles (\$9) for 10.

5 – Smoked grouper.

There are more than 100 types of this fish, most of which – and the tastiest – inhabit the northern part of the Pacific. It's very bony, so eating it can be slow, but once you get into the flow there's no tearing you away!

6 – Plaice.

Kamchatka – what better place for plaice?

7 – Halibut.

Only one piece of this should sate you as it's rather fatty.

8 – Kamchatkan butter.

On its own it's kinda plain; a caviar butty without it – don't even bother!

9 – Bread.

I think you can work this one out :).

10 – Kamchatkan beer.

The main ingredient of beer is of course water, and Kamchatka's got the water department fully covered: there's a lot of it and it's pure and tasty – be it volcanic, artesian or from the snow! So the beer's tasty too. We've a tradition already where after touchdown in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky we head straight for a certain no-name bar on the road to the Paratunka hot springs, and in five minutes give the nice owner his day's takings. Literally any of the many different sorts of beer in Kamchatka are champion brews. I wonder when they're going to start freighting it to Moscow and beyond. It's only a matter of time...

11 – Whisky.

A brutal but wholly necessary item for late evening sing-songs when far away from home. This time it was Highland Park – which isn't made in the Highlands, you know, but on Orkney :). Single malt Scotch became my poison of choice long ago.

12 – Malkinskaya mineral water.

Like the beer, just about any water on Kamchatka is tantalizingly tasty as it's so pure. But for some reason I long ago became addicted to specifically Malkinskaya. It too needs to get itself to Moscow and beyond. Come on entrepreneurs, it can't be that difficult...



Setting Sail

The following day, the rest of the expedition members who'd decided to miss out Paratunka and its hot springs arrived in Petropavlovsk. After meeting up with them we all piled onto the 'Athens' – our home from home for the next three weeks...



Athenian Nights

Still, never underestimate the human being's ability to easily get used to just about anything, especially when helped along by a super-friendly and super-jolly team! Here's the perfect example: Later, when we were on Kunashir, we had two nights scheduled in a comfortable hotel with en suite toilets, stores, fully stocked mini-bars and no sea rocking us to sleep. But our touristic contingent protested in chorus: "No! We want to stay on the Athens!"

The Athens holds 20 passengers (i.e., non-crew). There are eight cabins on the lower deck, one on the middle deck, and two other bunks on the way to the bathroom! On the lower deck it's a bit like traveling on an old train with the separate compartments, only they're on both sides of the corridor, there are no windows, and you getting rocked about somewhat more violently than on a train.

On the top deck of the Athens are the nine-strong crew's quarters plus those of the captain's fine pedigree – and very long – dog, Manya. Then there's the engine room. What else? Two loos, two showers, basins, washing machine and dryer, and two washing lines strung up specially for us. Incidentally, boots, rucksacks, and other such gear dried the fastest in the engine room! Sodden boots took a mere hour to dry out!

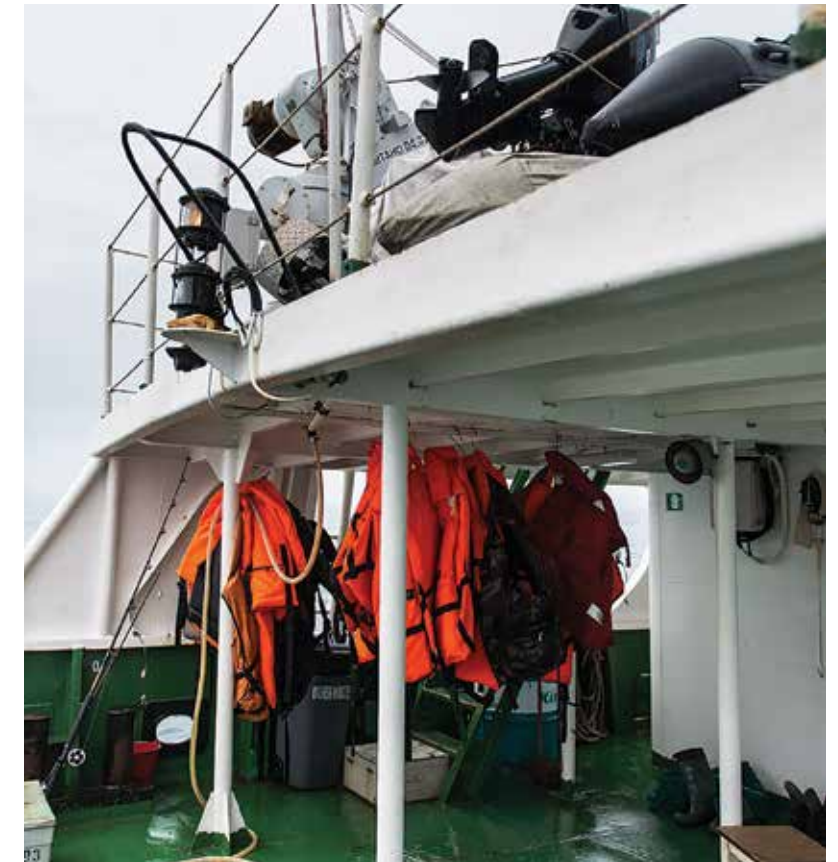
So yes – all fairly basic. But what made up for all that stark simplicity was the jewel in the Athens' crown – the 'restaurant car'. It was here where we spent most of our wakeful time on the ship, and where the ship's cook, Svetlana, served up her gorgeous gourmet dishes...

We ate unpretentiously, but regularly, copiously and scrumptiously. Each day the tables would bend under two or three choices of both starters and main course. Freshly caught fish was added to the rations we brought with us to make some incredibly yummy dishes, and to go with that Svetlana baked fresh bread daily. She even made up packed lunches for the volcano climbers.

After such an expedition with such delectable and necessarily huge (for energy) daily portions – it was reeaaal tough reverting back to the normal 'office' regime of sensible daily calorie intake once back home :).

In the 'restaurant car' we performed live concerts, watched movies, viewed the photos of the day, held briefings, played board games. Some dozed.

Another reason perhaps why the restaurant car seemed so important was the fact that there's no radio, TV or cell coverage along most of the Kuril ridge, and we refused to partake in satellite dish or Internet connection undertakings. I mean, let's face it, an expedition around the Kurils needs to differ from a Caribbean cruise! Well sure enough: the choppy seas, wild islands, harsh climate, radiant scenery, tubs of grub, and sing-alongs to the strum of a guitar – all of that made sure the distinction was felt!





Seasickness, Mosquitos, Gnats

Some of the expedition members were fearing seasickness like the plague! Early on they downed all manner of pills, wore special bracelets, and drank odd potions. But they ended up only performing these bizarre rituals a few times. It was kind of the same with insect repellents too, which were mostly forgotten about after a day or two. There simply weren't any mosquitoes to be protected from!

Only on Urup was there a spot of unpleasantness, when the posse came under attack by a particularly beastly little gnat while bathing in the sulfur springs. It gnaws out a hole in the skin, so the wound can take several days to heal. Ouch!

Ready for Adventure?

In all we spent 18 days visiting 12 islands (if we include Sakhalin).

On old Soviet maps all the Kurils were numbered from north to the south, meaning each had both a number and a name. The first island (No. 1) is Shumshu – the nearest to Kamchatka; the second is Paramushir; the third – Antsiferov Island; followed by Makanrushi, Onkotan, Kharimkotan, and so on.

Btw, the most beautiful (judging by photos online) island/volcano is Atlasov Island, which for some reason the Soviets never numbered. Maybe it was just too beautiful for a number? Unfortunately we didn't land on it as docking there is practically impossible.

Each day it was a new route, new outstanding views, new fantastic experiences. Over wet grass, through swamps, across dwarf pine in the rain, blinded by fog, and blown about by strong winds, we steadily moved down the string of islands from north to south...





Weather and Climate

It takes a tough individual to survive here; an even tougher individual to love the place. However, there *are* things to love about it; you just need to know where to look...

So what's it like living on the Kuril Islands? I don't know as I haven't lived there. But I imagine it wouldn't be easy – especially for those used to the modern urban lifestyle with just about everything at their fingertips. Also, we only caught a brief glimpse of daily life on the Kurils – and during an unusually clement summer at that. All the same, here's what I can tell you about the place...

The Kurils sit at around 45°-50° north. That's further south than cities such as Moscow, Berlin and London; and it's on around the same latitude as cities such as Vienna, Milan, Munich, Paris, Vancouver and Seattle.

When it came to making the Kurils, Mother Nature must have been having an off-day when putting the finishing touches to their climate. On one side of the island there's the cold northern Pacific Ocean; on the other – the bitterly freezing Sea of Okhotsk. If the wind blows from the south it can be warm and humid; if from the north – a Siberian chill can take over. So it gets a bit muddled. But generally in winter here it's always very cold – with snow up to the waist; while in summer it's just so-so cold – but always humid, plus foggy, plus drizzly, plus rainy. Lovely.

They say that in recent years the summer sun would appear just five times a year! And you can tell by the vegetation that grows here: moss, grass, in some places dwarf pine, and in swamps – massive pink expanses of carnivorous sundews. Trees grow only on the southern Kurils. Up north – no trees at all, just the odd tree-like shrub on Paramushir. They say that trees also grow on Urup island, but I didn't see any. Anyway – in short, the climate here: harsh and northern.

The weather here is as unpredictable as it is severe. Locals have a saying about it: "You'll find out about tomorrow's weather the day after tomorrow". They also say: "Drunkenness – it's a battle. And before every battle you need a drink!". And talking of alcohol, we ourselves also came up with an apt saying. Upon boarding the Athens of an evening all soaked, shivering and shattered, we'd chime: "A large vodka before dinner isn't just helpful – it's also scandalously too small a dose!"

Not that we were complaining about the weather generally. Overall throughout the whole expedition on the Kurils from north to south the climatic conditions were remarkably fair compared to what we were told they're normally like. After all, annual sunny days in this corner of the globe can normally be counted on your fingers.

Indeed, the locals told us we were real lucky with the weather. Things could have been a lot worse. Just the previous month there was a real fierce typhoon that would have swayed the Athens so violently many of us would have become badly seasick. So yes, it seemed like the gods were smiling upon us throughout our expedition.

An entry in the travelogue we were keeping of our trip: "On the seventh day of the expedition we saw a SUNSET" (in capital letters)



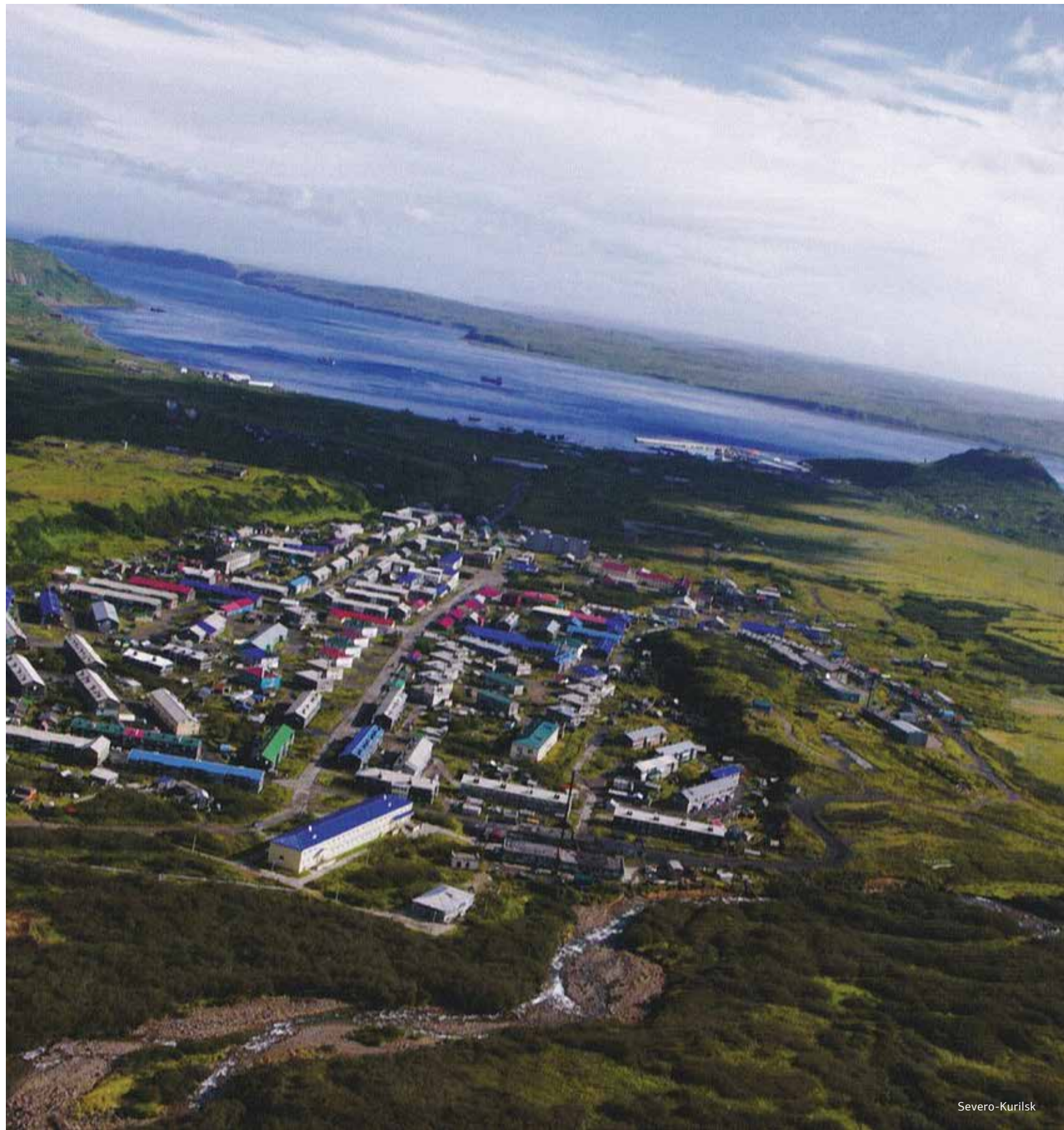
The first stop on our expedition sailing north to south along the Kurils was the island of Paramushir, which we arrived at the morning after leaving Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky the previous evening. It has a volcano – Ebeko – which we naturally scaled. At the top it was raining buckets and a hurricane was blowing, so taking pics wasn't the first thing on our minds: sadly there are hardly any photos worth showing you. All the same the views from up there were just awesome – you'll have to take my word for it. This was our first Kuril volcano – on the first day of our trip – and I think that's why it stands out so much. It was such a shock to the system: breakfast in Moscow; up a crazy volcano half-way round the world before dinner the next day ☺.

There's hardly any tourism on Paramushir at all (which we judged for ourselves seeing that we were the only folks visiting the island's massive volcano). But I guess that's to be expected: the climate is harsh, the rain is cold, and a fierce wind is forever blowing a gale. And the day of our visit was no exception: we descended the volcano dazed and shivering.

To the south of Paramushir there's a curious disused lighthouse. The locals complain that the authorities do nothing for its upkeep. But, then, lighthouses along the coast have long been pensioned off: long ago ships started using satellite navigators and autopilot. Alas, the old and sometimes very beautiful lighthouses and beacons serve only as decorations for the undulating landscapes here and attracting tourists or are abandoned and left to rot. Bit sad.

Here's us trying to shelter from the wind behind... "the phallic symbol of the Russian Federal Air Transport Agency", as our guide, Leonid, referred to this here beacon





Severo-Kurilsk

Towns

The total land mass of all the Kurils is slightly less than that of Israel or Slovenia, or about half the size of Belgium. However, its population is only around 20,000, half of which lives in three towns: (i) Severo-Kurilsk (North-Kurilsk), on Paramushir (2500 inhabitants); (ii) Kurilsk, on Iturup (1750 inhabitants); and (iii) Yuzhno-Kurilsk (South-Kurilsk), on Kunashir (7000).

Surprisingly, the first two have official 'town' status, yet their populations combined are smaller than that of the third, which is officially deemed an 'urban type settlement'. There are also a few tiny hamlets plus seasonal fishing villages, which come to life in the summer after hibernating through the winter.

The houses and hospitals in the towns get repaired, the roads get covered from time to time with fresh asphalt or concrete, and the residents appear to live pleasant, optimistic lives; any that don't simply leave, I reckon.



Yuzhno-Kurilsk

Inhabited Island No. 1 – Paramushir

You can't just turn up at Severo-Kurilsk – or anywhere else on the islands for that matter – on a whim. The Kuril Islands are a frontier zone, so you need to obtain a permit from the authorities beforehand. Then, once you arrive, the first thing you do is register with a local official.

And that's how our Kuril experience began: a stern frontier guard met us at the appointed 'location X' on a volcanic beach. He checked all our group one by one against a list, carefully matching the photos and names. Some of the posse got a little irritated at his unwaveringly moody manner, so started to josh and jibe a bit. Bad idea. With a face bereft of any emotion whatsoever, the officer curtly uttered, "Spare me the sarcasm," and gave us the kind of look that told us we'd better comply!

All lists, passports and faces matched up, the formalities were promptly completed, and we boarded a bus and headed into town.

It would appear that fate destined this day to be miserable for us. For not long after the surly border guard's warm welcome, the first thing we found out about Severo-Kurilsk was that it sadly suffered a tragic natural disaster some 60+ years ago. Alas, the town was originally founded on the (Pacific) ocean side of the island. Bad plan. In 1952, a tsunami washed the town away, killing nearly half its population. The tragedy was kept secret as per Soviet tradition, only to become declassified in the early nineties after the CCCP's fall. After the disaster Severo-Kurilsk was rebuilt at a safer distance from the shore. To this day the memory of the catastrophe lingers on.

The ruined old town left by the tsunami presents a dismal spectacle: skeletal buildings, shipwrecks where the huge surge of water cast them ashore, waterlogged or overgrown streets, abandoned rusty machinery and other unsightly remains left over from the disaster. Everything just left to corrode and decay. No clean-up operation. A distressing sight, especially in twilight under a cold drizzle (it rained on us for most of the day).



Ship cemetery



The new Severo-Kurilsk on the other hand is surprisingly welcoming. It's hardly the liveliest place on earth, but it was much better than I'd expected. There are shops, a beauty salon, playgrounds, a kindergarten and school, monuments, a church, a newly refurbished clinic... even a hotel to accommodate not-too-fussy guests. Sure, it's not got all the creature comforts most of us are used to, but it has got pretty much everything people need to get on with their day-to-day lives.

Some of the housing blocks are newly refurbished; others create a sad impression, again, especially in bad weather. In fact, it's not quite clear how people survive the harsh winters here in such rundown barracks; but they do – somehow.

The winters here are not only cold, but also very windy and snowy. For locals, a typical winter morning often begins with a healthy exercise regime: digging their way out of their homes through the snow that's barricaded the front doorway. Incidentally, here all doors open inwards – there's no way they could be opened otherwise some days because of the snow.

Some roads here are made of reinforced concrete, but most are just dirt tracks. Cars tend to be SUVs that can cope with the poor road situation, and most are old right-hand drive ones imported from Japan – complete with heavy-duty cross-country tires. Quad bikes are also popular.

Surprisingly, there's a hydroelectric plant here! They say there that the idea to use a small waterfall nearby as an energy source was a Japanese idea. Today's installation has recently been renovated and they've laid a concrete road to it. The facility gives off a quiet hum so it seems to be working.

Folks here have very different lives to folks on the mainland, but I always got the impression they all love the place dearly, are extremely proud to live here, and relish demonstrating their toughness to delicate office drones from Moscow :).

So, what do the locals do for living? There are three main occupations: fish, fishing, and, for variety, catching fish. Well, there's also a customs office and a frontier outpost. And it's the same on all the inhabited Kurils.







Matua

Matua was a Japanese military base during the Second World War; then there was a Soviet base on the island in the second half of the 20th century. Now the island is completely uninhabited, and the disused military installations have been left as somber monuments to attempts at colonization of the islands. There are also for some unknown reason thousands upon thousands of steel barrels here littered all over the – otherwise beautiful – landscape.

Much of the island is in fact a volcano – the 1500-meter-high Sarychev Peak. On June 12, 2009 it erupted; indeed, volcanologists reckon it's the most active of all the Kurils' volcanoes: it's always smoking and occasionally spews streams of lava.





Rasshua

“A leisurely stroll around two hills called Hammer and Sickle,” on the island of Rasshua was promised by our guides. However, it turned out they’d been neither to Hammer nor Sickle themselves. So they weren’t to know that the road there exists only on paper.

We thus had to traipse three kilometers across all sorts of harsh undergrowth, sometimes through grass that grew higher than the tallest of us, up and down gorges, and across rivers and swamps – and all that under constant torrential rain. So that was how our ‘leisurely stroll’ turned out. Grrr.







The Most Beautiful Volcano in the World

Every single Kuril island is volcanic. Wikipedia states there are 68 Kuril volcanoes (other sources' figures differ slightly), 36 of which are still smoking. And around and about the islands there are another ~100 underwater.

There are small volcanoes up to two kilometers high, right down to mere volcanic 'pimples'. Throughout our expedition we clambered up and across seven of them, in doing so totting up around six kilometers on the y-axis and about a hundred on the x. The smoldering seven we conquered were as follows: Ebeko, Krenitsina, Ushishir, Zavaritskovo, Atsonupuri, Tyatya, and Mendeleyeva.

I'm not sure why, but for some reason volcanoes are my fave natural phenomena. All volcanoes are unique in their own special way, and each is beautiful in its own special way too, so to compare and rank them is no simple task.

However, now I know which volcano tops my list of the best of the best – by far.

Easy: it's the Krenitsyn volcano on the Kuril island of Onkotan. It's also a rather exclusive volcano – just for the more discerning connoisseurs of volcanism; after all – it doesn't even have its own Wiki page in English :).

The views it offers are absolutely magical.

The almost perfectly round caldera is colossal – stretching seven (7!) kilometers across. Inside the caldera there's a correspondingly capacious lake, out of which peeps the cone of a new volcano (height 1324m). The lake's at a height of around 400 meters above sea level, and its depth is about 200 meters.

Onkotan island has a population of 0. And there aren't that many more tourists visit the island.

The only way you can get to Onkotan is by boat. We landed on the beach near the mouth of the river Fontanka, then had to walk ~15km up an old and barely passable track to the rim of the caldera. In all, 30km covered this the day, while our climb in altitude reached only ~500m.

Our guides told us that there are other, shorter routes to the caldera; however, though shorter, they apparently feature stretches of tall tangled vegetation. We figured it's much better to take the longer rough track than the shorter one with overgrowth. Still, if any of you, dear readers, might know about any other – kinder – routes to the caldera, let me know!

As you'll see from the pix, this was yet another day of typically far-from-ok Kuril weather, and when we at last got to the top of the caldera the fog was thicker than ever. Still, after a bit of impromptu shamanism (involving chanting, coin-tossing and... whisky drinking;) it started to clear. At first the edge of the lake appeared, then the base of the cone of the volcano, then the whole lake. Only the peak of the volcano didn't show itself. So we had to turn to our imaginations to envisage how monumental and beautiful it all looks together, when caldera + lake + cone all come together and say 'cheese' for the camera.

What can I say about this place? Take a wide-angle lens with you! The view is so sweeping that a normal lens just isn't up to the job. Or take a drone with you and have it take the pics from up above. We were told that a party once came with a motorboat and sailed round the lake. Good idea; that's what we'll do next time. I think tents would work too. We could stay a couple of days, bathe, and 'ramble-the-rim'. So we'd need machetes – or better chainsaws – to hack our way through the thick undergrowth too.





A Brief Kurilian Glossary

Bambuchnik (Kurilian bamboo). A type of herbaceous flower that grows on mountain slopes and forms a blanket thicket. In southern Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands the thicket gets so dense it's practically impassible. It's one of the most cold-resistant types of bamboo there is.

Barrancos (Eng.: Barranco, from the Spanish *barrancoso*, meaning uneven). A ravine that runs down the side of a volcano from peak to foot caused by erosion.

Caldera (from the Spanish for 'big cauldron'). "A large cauldron-like depression that forms following the evacuation of a magma chamber/reservoir" (- Wikipedia) i.e., the hollow inside a volcano left after an eruption. Often with steep walls up to the rim and a flat base.

Somma (from the Italian *Somma*, as in Mount Somma - an integral part of the volcanic complex 'Somma-Vesuvius'; in fact - the remnant of the large volcano out of which the peak cone of Mount Vesuvius has grown.) "A somma volcano is a volcanic caldera that has been partially filled by a new central cone... A number of the world's best examples of somma volcanoes are found on Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula and the Kuril Islands" (- Wikipedia).

Stlanik (*Pinus pumila*, creeping pine). A coniferous evergreen shrub with needle-like leaves that forms creeping shrub cover in mountainous locations with unfavorable climatic conditions.

Fumarola (from the Italian *fumarola*, which, in turn, is from the Latin *fumus* - smoke). An opening often in volcanoes' craters that emits steam and gases (Wikipedia).

Shiksha (*empetrum*, crowberry). A scrubby evergreen medicinal plant belonging to the vacciniaceous family of plants.





More on the Weather

Into the second half of our 'cruise' the sun started to appear occasionally – usually around 2pm, but not for long. Then it returned to murkiness and drizzle again. Sometimes the sun was visible for a third of or even half a day.

We'd set off on our treks sometimes with visibility down to 100 meters, with only the sound of the waves and the motorboat returning to the Athens to be heard: spooky!

There was only one (!) real fully sunny morning during the whole trip – on Kharimkotan, only to be followed by nothing but overcast gloominess and then rain. In fact, all the other mornings were identical weather-wise: dismal, dreary, dull, wet; also foggy – so foggy that sometimes we could hardly see the shore until we were almost hitting it in the small motor boat we used for our daily landings.



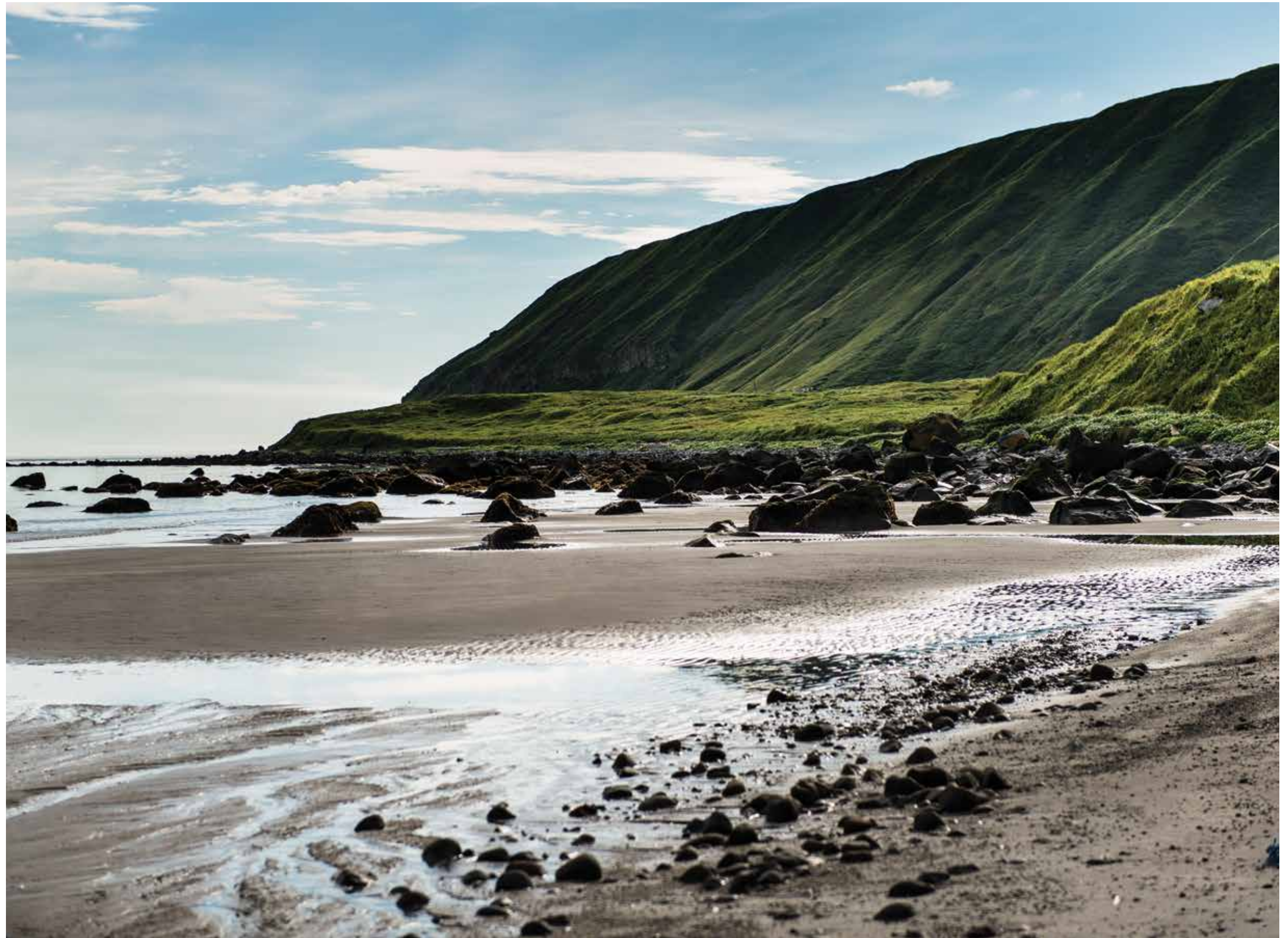
Kharimkotan

On this island, besides checking out an abandoned village and the surrounding severe beauty, some of the group got down to picking – and eating – lots of berries (of which there were zillions). Then came the search for Japanese old glass buoys...

Having heard the curious historical background info about these glass objects we went hunting for some along the shores of Kharimkotan. And we did find some – quite a few; sadly, nothing that'd ever find its way into a collectors' catalog.

...Before the invention of plastic the Japanese used either wood or hollowed glass for beacon-floats. And eons later, unlike the wooden ones (which just rotted away) the glass ones are still going strong, bobbing about here and there and occasionally getting washed ashore.

It turns out there are collectors of antique buoys such as these, who buy and sell them and consult specialist catalogs dedicated to them. And some old-school fishermen, despite their economic ineffectiveness, still even use them!





Ushishir

Ushishir is an old volcano with a caldera that's collapsed down to sea level. A volcano bay. The best place here for visual meditation is up on the top of the edge of the caldera. The bay itself inside the island is pure eye candy. Then there are waves coming in off both the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Okhotsk on the outer sides. It's a place where you can just sit and stare at the surroundings for hours, and the higher you get up the sides the better – it's sure worth the climb.

Ushishir isn't quite an island actually; it's an archipelago made up of two small and a great many tiny islands and rock formations, almost in the middle of the string of Kurils. The two largest islands are called Yankicha and Ryponkicha. These sure sound a little Slavic; and they are in fact russifications of old Ainu names, with the former meaning something like 'convenient for disembarkation' (as our local expert guide, Igor, informed us).





Disembarkation on Yankicha turned into an unexpected morning cold shower on our motorboat as the waves nearer the shore were quite choppy – most bracing and refreshing. Our excursion on land was less startling though no less stimulating...

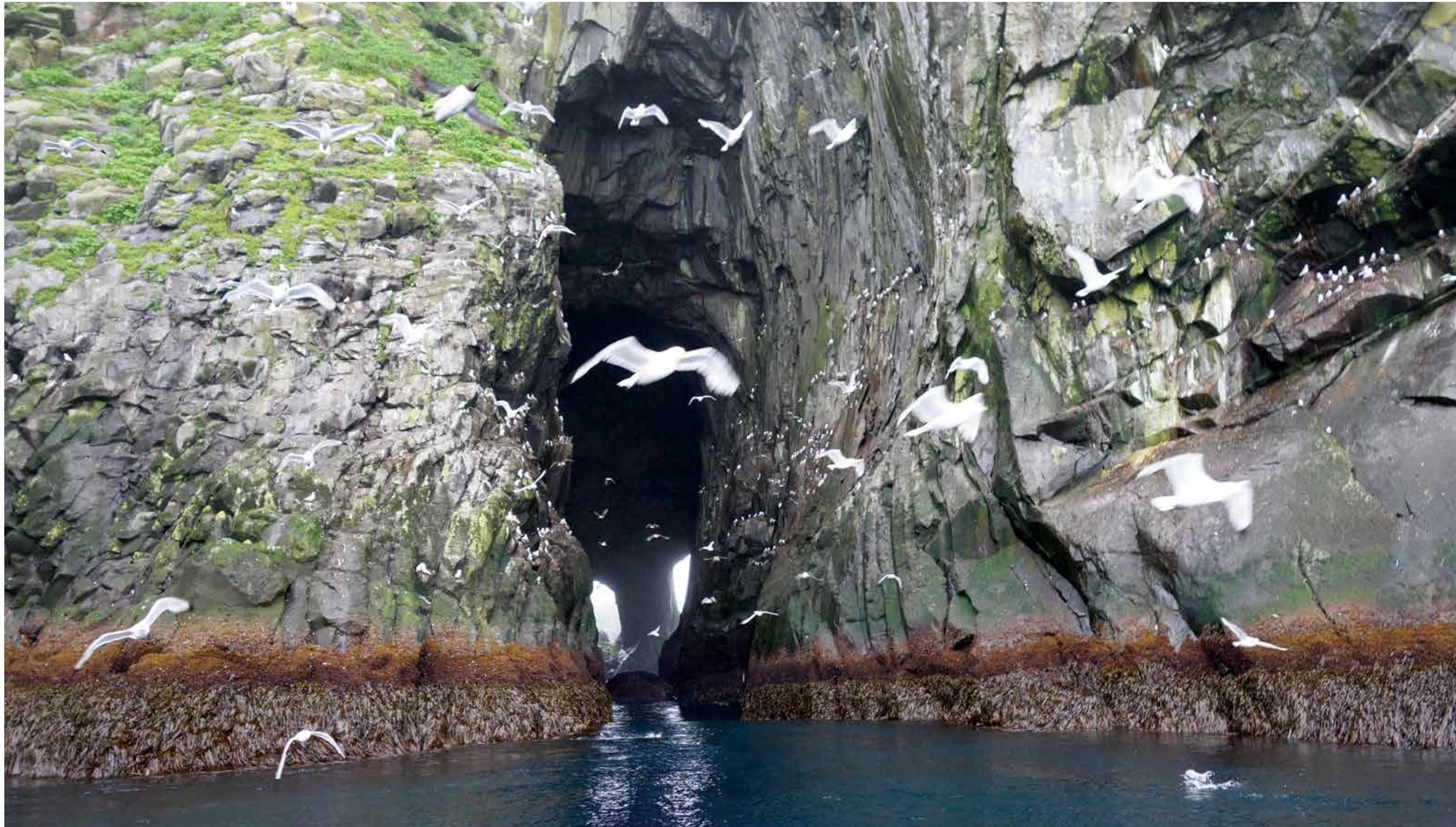
The island is an old sea volcano, whose remaining caldera rises up to 300 meters above sea level. Inside there's a small bay with three little bumps inside – three relatively new baby volcanoes.

We didn't stay long near sea level when faced with this unearthly beauty. Before you knew it we were dashing up the side of the caldera towards the top of its rim. That was no cakewalk – the going was tough due to the dense high grass we had to wade through. "Like walking through an enormous stack of hay," our guide remarked.

The top rim of the caldera can be walked around in two or three or four hours – depending on the stamina level of the group. And the further anticlockwise you go, the higher and more grandiose the views.

Ushishir last erupted in 1884 – 130 years ago, meaning it's still very much an active volcano. Besides the giveaway volcanic appearance of the caldera and the three bumps inside it, also present are ancillary volcanisms – a small fumarole clearing with hot springs, which, with the careful placement of a tent and rocks, serves as the perfect hot-spring pool! The only things missing are the pina coladas :).





But the more active and restless among us decided to leave the coziness of the 'pool' and explore the island further. And we were rewarded handsomely for our restiveness: we discovered a tunnel through the base of the caldera that goes from the sea through to the bay inside. Bingo! We also came across plenty of exotic birds perched precariously on the cliffs...

So now I know: Ushishir is one of the most breathtakingly amazing and photogenic – and pleasantly unpeopled – places on the planet ☺.



Simushir

A typical day on our Kuril expedition would start with our motorboats landing on a new, unknown shore. Sometimes this was easy, other times it was Saving-Private-Ryan-opening-scenes, almost: the sea got choppy, the weather got rainy and windy, and the adrenalin got pumping – as did the cortisol. On those days just making it ashore resembled no less than a hugely heroic deed, so we ended such days with similarly hugely heroic festivities once back on the Athens. But on the clear days – the landings plus the ensuing day spent onshore were easy and unforced. The day on Simushir was one such day. The going on this day was so easy it allowed us to up the tempo a bit: quick landing, quick marching, quick evacuation and quickly onwards on our

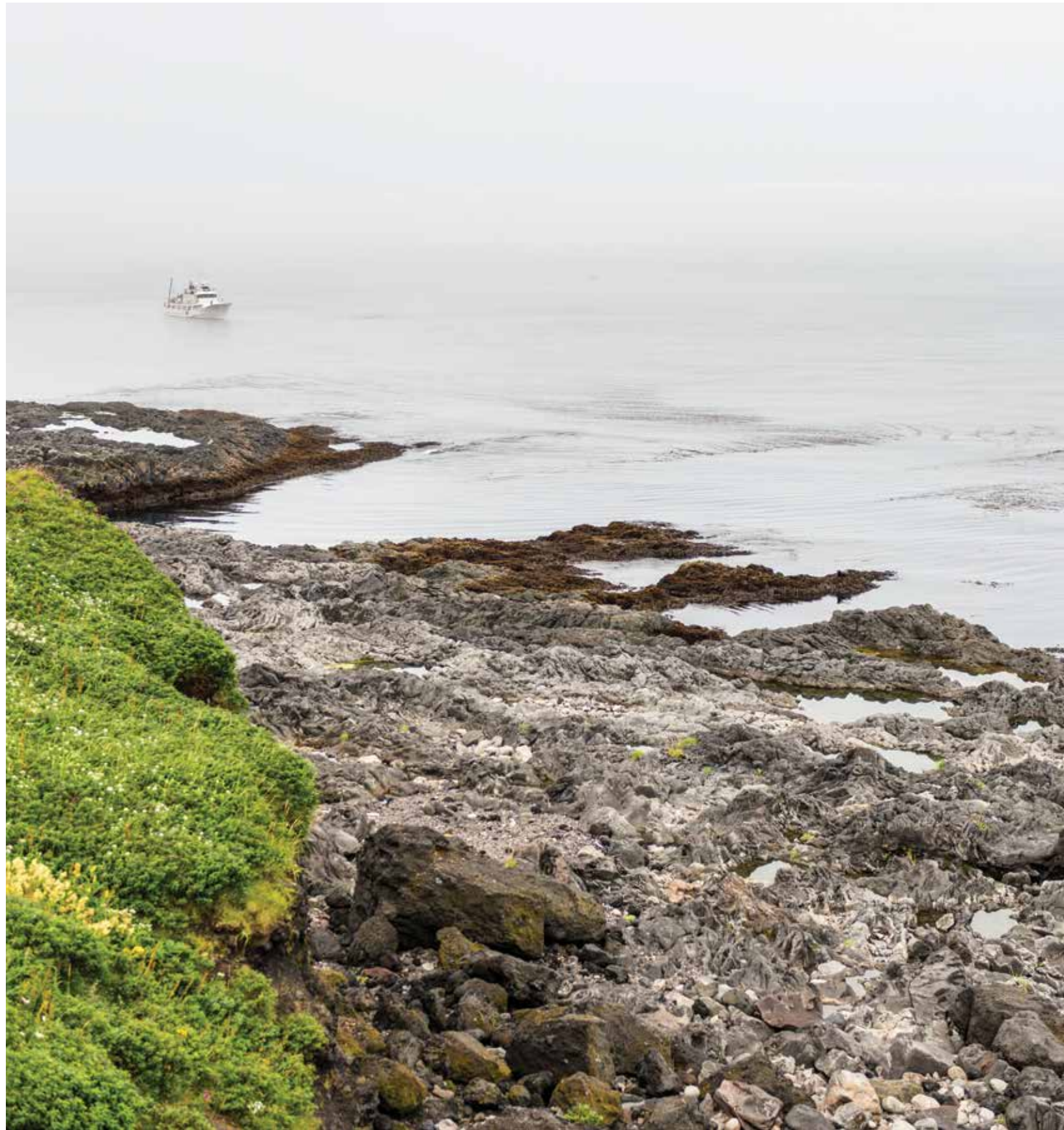
journey. The climb to the highest point was about 400 meters, wading through the already familiar Kuril tundra – moss, long grass, overgrowth and sweet... empetrum!

In some places the clumps of empetrum became almost black with the abundance of berries. Alas, we had little time for such botanical beguilement – a storm was expected that evening so we had to hop over to the next island before the sea got too rough. This meant we got up the Zavaritski Caldera in no time at all. Upon landing ashore there was a thick mist all around so there wasn't much to look at. However, half-way up the ascent all of a sudden the mist lifted. Naturally this led to several gigabytes of photos and vids taken lickety-split.





The views from the top are breathtaking. There are volcanic calderas in calderas in calderas in calderas, steep multicolored slopes down to the lake below in the middle... oh such charming natural beauty. The diameter of the smallest ring is approximately three kilometers. Next time, when not so hurried, we'll have to stroll round it, to take in the sublime scenes properly.



Alas, we only had one day on Simushir, and the democratic majority voted for visiting its Zavaritski Caldera. However, besides this volcano there are two other charming cones on the island – Prevo Peak (1360m) and Milna Volcano (1539m). There's also Brouton Bay, on the northern shores of the island. They say that a military-naval base was planned to be constructed there. For that they had to deepen the bay (it was practically blocked by the caldera of an old volcano). And to widen the water lane they used a million tons of TNT to blast through the rock! At least that was the story as told by the locals.

Btw, they never did get round to building the base; however, the entrance to the bay – probably since back then – is now surrounded by two capes with aptly CCCP names – Cape Soviet and Cape Sentry!

As mentioned, we were expecting bad weather that night – a typhoon no less. But we boarded the boat in good time, dashed across the Bussol Strait, and hid in one of the bays of Urup island (where next day we caught loads of fish and colored our skins yellow by bathing in sulfuric springs!), and the typhoon shot past us unnoticed.

Afterwards, the local news was full of stories of hurricane winds, flooding and other stormy unpleasantness around the Sea of Okhotsk, but mercifully we didn't see any of it.





Volcanic Marching: Atsonupuri

Fortunately almost all the Kuril climbs are light and non-mountaineering-esque; sometimes they're long and tedious, but never too tough. It's a matter of just taking it easy and slowly, getting the lungs working to full capacity, getting a bit of a sweat on too, and before you know it (in two or three or four hours) you're at the top. And then it all becomes worth it – the beauty, the bewilderment, and the pure bliss. 360-degree awesomeness – outwards, and also inwards – into the caldera or crater. Then it's clickity-clack on the Leica, then back down to the bottom again. That was the routine most of the time. Apart from Atsonupuri on the island of Iturup...

Atsonupuri is relatively small – in all just 1205 meters above sea level – but it took us a good six hours to get up it! As if that wasn't bad enough, the seasonal fishermen who'd transported us to the island had decided the best place to drop us ashore was in a swamp two kilometers from the start of the path that winds up the volcano. Thanks guys!

It took us so long to get up this volcano because we had to perform hours of light mountaineering moves with the use of ropes to traverse some of the way. Then it got all *Rambo II* jungle-like, plus rather wet underfoot. At least the bears weren't in actual evidence – only their... yep :).





Worst of all was a lengthy barranco we had to climb up. It kinda formed a path up through the thick jungle so that was the best way to go, but it soon turned from cozy track to hellish gorge – a steep one at that, with tree stumps often blocking the way. Just a kilometer of Dante's Passage took us nearly three hours (there and back)! Afterwards, even our experienced guide Dima had to admit: "I knew it would be hard, but not torture!"

So, overall, it was not much fun at all... but then, after hours of struggling, with dead legs, puffing and panting, and with drinking water fast running out towards the end... then... we finally make it to the rim of the crater, and a wide somma volcano comes into view before us. It was just another couple hundred meters up that and we were at the very top.

The beauty from up there is indescribable. Luscious landscapes abound. And a feeling of victory over the volcano ☺.

A brief pause for pix... Then it was back down again.



Farewell Atsonupuri;
miss you already!



The Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything

Many of you will know that the answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything is 42. But no one – NO ONE! – including Douglas Adams, the one who came up with the Ultimate Question and its answer, knows why it's 42 and not, say, 17, 41 or 43. I didn't know earlier either. Now I do. And you won't believe it...

I didn't go searching for the answer to this eternal question. It was the other way round – the answer found me: in a hot river on the island of Iturup!

So, the Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything is 42 because... that's the temperature of the water in this magical river.

What a place! It's true I'd bathed before in hot thermal pools. And I'd swum in the hot lake at the foot of Khodutka. But sliding down piping hot *waterfalls* – this was a first.

The hot river flows over stones and down small natural and semi-natural slides in the rock. Just incredible. The best hot springs I've ever experienced. 42 without a doubt!

There are just two 'buts' you need to consider if you want to bathe here:

1. The hot river flows from the thermal springs of the Baransky volcano, which is several kilometers from the town of Kurilsk and nearby villages. From all other populated places it's either far, very far, or silly far. So if you want to swim – you need to go to the lengthy trouble of actually getting there.

2. The water in the river is quite acidic (well, it is volcanism; that's to be expected), and if it gets in your eyes (in a waterfall, not a remote prospect) – it stings most unsavorily. So make sure to have some swimming goggles with you – a very useful and in-demand item here. Also, be careful with silver trinkets – they don't mix well with same acidic water. Oh, and also make sure to have some beers with you – the perfect beverage for in-between dip-and-slide sessions in these hot pools and waterfalls!

Inhabited Island No. 2 – Iturup

Kurilsk – the third-in-size town of the Kuril Islands, situated neatly between Severo-Kurilsk (North) and Yuzhno-Kurilsk (South).

We arrived on Iturup on a real calm, sunny early morning, so we were loving it from the get-go. Things only got better – the first shop we'd seen in 10 days stocked... BEER. BEEEEER! Ok, so it was twice the average price for beer in Russia, but we weren't complaining!

Not far from Kurilsk is the largest fish-processing plant on the Kurils. We didn't get to check it out but we did see the multicolored roofs of the place from afar. Apparently it churns out a whole 400 tons of fish per DAY!

Sure, Iturup's economy is mostly all about fishing. However, it has another interesting sideline – in rhenium. Wikipedia says that the world's only economically viable deposits of the rare metal are to be found here; 40 tons per year are taken out of the Kudriavy volcano together with volcanic gases.

The housing here is much like in Severo-Kurilsk: Some houses (especially on the outskirts) seem ready to collapse; how they keep the heat in during winters I'll never know. But then downtown it's all new refurbs and bright colors – quite the model town.

The roads in the center are most impressive. Smooth asphalt, new street markings, perfect sidewalks, and ongoing improvements to infrastructure – even further out from the center.

Despite there being two (!) airports, locals mostly get to and from the mainland by ferry – as it's affected less by the mostly bad weather. The second airport – Iturup International Airport – opened just last month. So – two airports for ~7500 inhabitants! I reckon that's a world record!

You get about the island mostly on public transportation – for example in vehicles like the one in the pic to the right. Prices are twice the average.

Like in Severo-Kurilsk, in Kurilsk we also didn't have long to do much tourism stuff. After our dip in the hot waterfalls, it was back onto the Athens to set sail for our next island, Shikotan – i.e., a little further in the direction of our next Kurilsk – Yuzhno-Kurilsk...







Shikotan – The Kuril's answer to New Zealand

If you've ever been to New Zealand, and then one day you were to somehow magically wake up on Shikotan island, you'd probably think you'd been teleported to NZ. They're just so similar!

Non-volcanic, gently rolling, short-grassed landscapes, nano-bamboo, picturesque and seemingly carefully positioned trees. All neatly trimmed, colored, and – you'd think – Photoshopped, and glistening under the inevitable Kuril rain. If sheep and sun were added – it'd be the carbon copy of NZ – somewhere around the center of the North Island.

After our extensive tour of New Zealand in 2012, I came to the conclusion that though Kamchatka is cooler than either of the NZ islands taken separately, if taken together – they're cooler than Kamchatka. However, if we compare both NZ islands with both Kamchatka and the Kurils then NZ has no chance. Kamchatka + Kurils = the bomb! The untouchable bomb!





The one downside to K+K: To get at their best gems you need to travel a lot further. Your suitcase of cash needs to be fatter too, but I won't dwell on that... Let me continue with my travelogue narrative... The name of the island comes from Ainu and translates as 'best island'. Yep, they got that right, those ancient Kuril aborigines ☺. Today around 2000 inhabitants live on the island in two villages – Malokuril'skoye and Krabozavodskoye.

Worthy of a mention are Cape 'Krai Sveta' ('edge of the world') and its lighthouse. Sadly I didn't see either up close as I was recovering from the previous day's 'try everything' mode and decided I'd best not hold up the other troops with my slowed tempo. However, those who did make it to the island said it was definitely worth it.

The Baltic states have amber. Shikotan has agate. Much better! There are simply tons of it scattered across the shores and in the surrounding waters here just lying there. The posse therefore proceeded to search for and pocket some of the prettier specimens. Seemed a shame just to leave it there, abandoned. Turned out we gathered so much that when we embarked back onto the boat the waterline had risen a bit ☺. Bizarrely, after careful selecting and stockpiling, most of the rocks were thrown overboard, much like the keen carp angler puts his catch back into the lake after taking so much trouble to hook it. Nowt queer as folk... ☺.

Still just off Shikotan, at last we were able to get some swimming in! The water was a bearable 17°C – much warmer than on Simushir, where just looking at the ocean made you shiver. Here though, the conditions were just right for a diving contest off the boat. Nice.



Flora and Fauna

We were told that Shikotan is the only Kuril island on which snakes are found. Also here – and on neighboring Kunashir and Iturup – can be found a most unusual plant which the locals call Ipritka. The pollen (or oil) of this flora species is a really potent allergen, and if you come into contact with it things can get very painful – including serious burns. So if you're ever here, dress appropriately and don't touch anything!

Now for a particular species of fauna: the Arctic foxes here are numerous – and curious! They dig out little dens for themselves in the cliffs (remarkably, none of the exotic birds had their abodes on the same cliffs!), and live not a bad life – propagating aplenty. They're not all that afraid of humans (or dogs, we found out), and come up close sniffing and snorting with their cheeky little snouts... Oh, and don't leave clothes or other belongings lying around – they're very fond of marking out their territory – and that includes any items left thereon!



Kunashir's Tyatya

Kunashir's Tyatya is one of the most beautiful volcanos in the world, without a doubt. It forms an almost perfect conical form, with the peak cut off. From the large old caldera rising up another 300 meters is another, fresher cone. If you're lucky with the weather here the volcano can be fully visible – and the view is, I'm told, just fantastic. Alas, we only got to see it getting on towards an overcast evening. Nevertheless, it's still possible to stare at this astounding natural spectacle for ages – no matter the weather or unfavorable time of day.

After having inspected this magnificent volcanic specimen from the sea, we proceeded to climb up it to get the views from the peak. They were fantastic views too, especially since the sun was

out when up there. The only downside – that sun was much too hot! Meanwhile, down below, a dense fog was shrouding the ocean, so the only thing we saw after our descent was the summit of the neighboring Ruryui volcano to one side and, I think, Berutarube volcano on Iturup island on the other.

Tyatya volcano towers 1819 meters above sea level (actually a little less since the crater has collapsed a bit). Scaling it is tiresome and takes ages on foot; however, the going is never too intense and walking up it and down again in one day is realistic. Much more fun though is to go most of the way on quad bikes!





We were told that in the past you had to battle your way through several kilometers of thick bamboo jungle. Now things are much more convenient – from the shore to the foot of the volcano the quad bikes have beaten a reasonably smooth track.

After a couple of hours of quadding the posse was split into two groups: those who were shattered already – the ‘crabs’, and those who still had plenty of stamina left in them – the ‘moose’, who ~~walked~~ clambered up the last leg up a (solidified!) lava flow to finally make it to the southern part of the cone.

The moose sure had their work cut out. The lava was all twisted and uneven, and rocks were always crumbling to bits underfoot so you always had to watch your step. Walking sticks are a must, not to mention plentiful water supplies.

Then when you think you’ve made it to the edge of the crater you find there’s still further to go! The actual topographical summit is another 200 meters anticlockwise. Hmm. Wind’s a-blowing, fumaroles are a-fuming, boots on the slope are a-slipping... wonderful! At least you can have fun shouting your head off setting off eerie volcanic echoes!

On the western slope lie the remains of an Mi-8 helicopter, which sadly crashed into the side of the volcano back in 1983. No one survived. A macabre spectacle.

On the way back down we had to up the tempo quite a bit since we’d *over-stared* our welcome up at the crater. We had to get back to the boat and shoot over to Yuzhno-Kurilsk, where a nice and cozy hotel was waiting for us. But for all our rushing, we still didn’t make the boat in time – in time, that is, before the border guards’ working day finishes; no border guards – no crossing the border (to... – tell you later!...). So, to everyone’s delight we were forced to stay another night aboard the Athens ☺.





Gobsmacked on Kunashir

Besides Tyatya, on Kunashir island there's still plenty to check out, including: ludicrous lava columns on the coast, the fantastic fumaroles of Mendeleyeva volcano, and the magnificent mud baths in Golovnina's caldera, for example. Bathing in a 30°C muddy lake didn't quite do it for me, but the volcanism of Mendeleyeva – especially the lava columns there – now that was something else. Quite simply gobsmackingly unforgettable.

The stone columns on the shore at Cape Stolbchaty (Cape Column) are unique and stunningly beautiful. Huge stone pillars, almost perfectly hexahedral forms, and up to dozens of meters high.

I've only seen something resembling such a phenomenon twice before – on Kamchatka and in Northern Ireland (Giant's Causeway). The columns are formed during massive volcanic eruptions, when huge quantities of basalt lava spew out of the earth and form a lava plateau several meters deep.

Then, as a result of cooling this plateau gets 'column-ized': up above the lava quickly falls in temperature and hardens little by little the further it cools, while below all's still hot and liquid. With cooling the volume of the lava contracts and cracks appear on its surface, in places forming nicely symmetrical five or six-sided long 'tubes' of rock. Science calls these phenomena Benard cells.





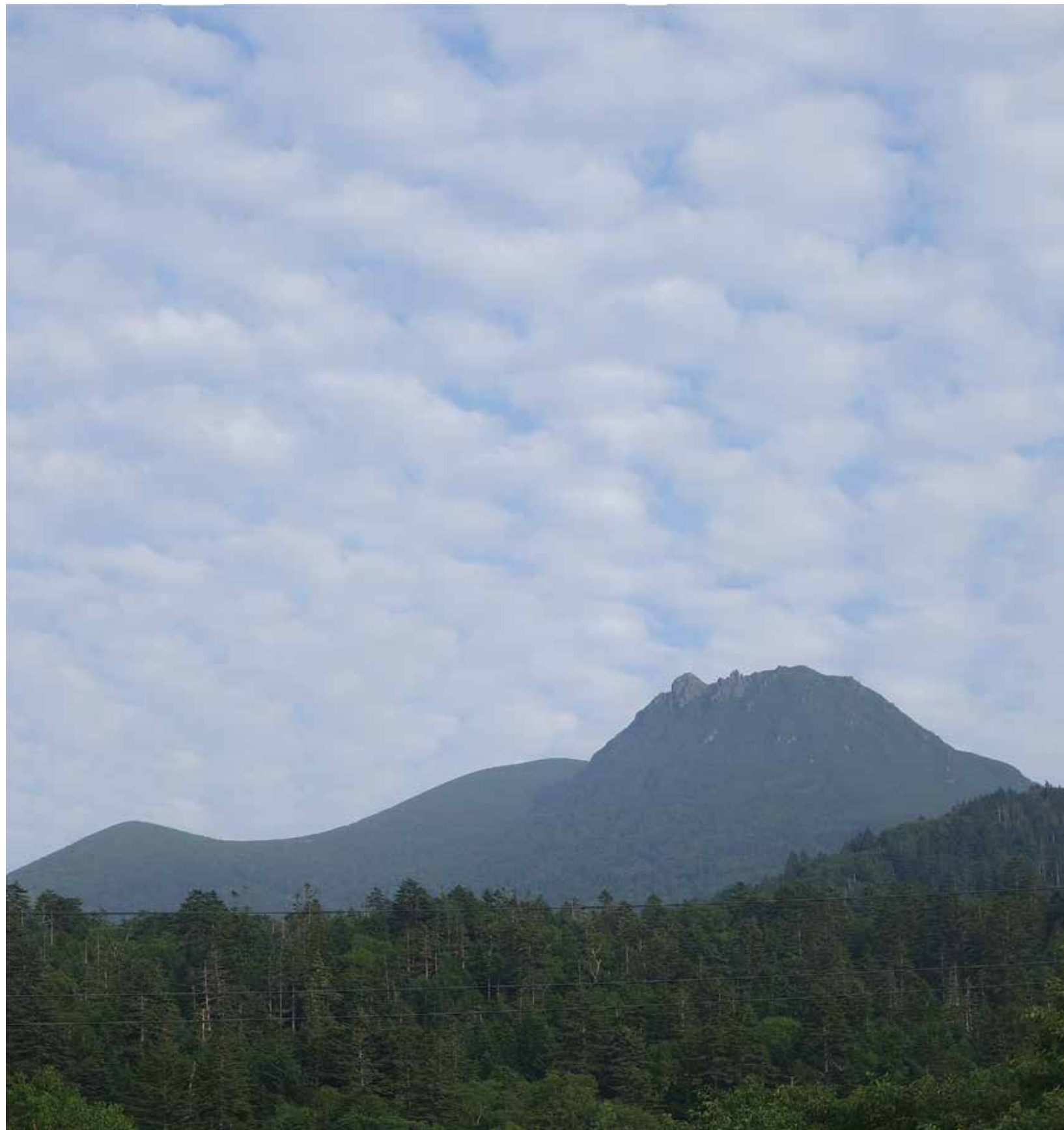


The stone formations also surround very picturesque little bays in which you can take a dip. The water's chilly, but at least it doesn't burn. It's nice just to float and meditate and slowly soak up the lush and utterly unusual surroundings.

Climbing up Mendeleyeva Volcano is by no means easy, despite its being relatively modest in height – 886 meters above sea level. But!...

You need not trekking sticks but... *gloves* to go up it. For you don't walk up it – you clamber up it. We're talking almost sheer slopes, with bamboo and elfin wood and ipritka forever slowing you down. This was no ramble. This was more a gamble (would we make it? ☺).





I lost track of time as I was just too busy concentrating on the climb so as to not fall off the side of the mountain. Still, we did eventually make the summit – thoroughly exhausted (everything ached!). The views are just astounding (we thankfully had sunny weather). Both shores – of the Pacific and the Okhotsk – are visible, as are various volcanos, and also Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk (as if in the palm of your hand).

Then it was time for the descent. And yes – the going was almost as hard as it was going up. Still, utterly unforgettable. Totally recommended. But I'm not repeating it! Btw, locals say that in profile the undeniably masculine Mendeleyeva resembles... a sleeping beauty. Indeed. Let's hope he never finds out :). Have a look for yourself in the large pic here on the left.

And now the bonus track – mini waterfalls at the foot of Mendeleyeva volcano. Perfect after an admittedly sweaty ascent and descent. The water's only about 20°C – just about bearable. An extra 5°C warmer would be nice... They say further up it's a lot warmer.

The caldera is approximately five kilometers in diameter, and inside it there's a fresh cone of a new volcano and two lakes. One lake's called 'Goriachi' (hot), which logically contains cold water; and the name of the second is 'Kipyashii' (boiling) (though the water's a mere 30°C). I'm sure that when they got their names the first was indeed hot while the second boiled.

Inhabited Island No. 3 – Kunashir

The only place ashore the isles we stayed at for more than one night was Yuzhno-Kurilsk. Surprisingly, as mentioned, unlike the smaller-in-size Kurilsk and Severo-Kurilsk (whose combined populations are less than that of Yuzhno-Kurilsk), which have the official status of ‘town’, Yuzhno-Kurilsk is officially deemed merely an ‘urban type settlement’. However, in terms of the overall level of development, it is clearly the de facto capital of the Kurils.

Like on the other principal isles, the population lives mostly off fishing, plus there are plenty of customs officers and border guards – and a military base. Other folks you may get to find here are tourists – only very occasionally: a few thousand a year come. The locals say that’s plenty. Any more and there’d be a crush: all the local natural places of interest are fit only for small groups!

Building renovations continued as a theme here, as did freshly laid new roads. Boom town again: they’re building a geothermal power station among other things. The place also has quite a few hotels. None are five-star with pool and spa, but the two-story modest lodgings are freshly renovated, clean and actually not half bad at all.

Overall, it can be said it’s less harsh down here in the south compared with its somewhat more extreme cousin-towns farther north along the isles. The cars aren’t only off-roaders, the roads themselves are really good, and life seems calmer here and less threatening – more civilized even. Maybe it’s all just down to the less severe climate? Could well be. Everyday life sure seemed physically and spiritually more comfortable.

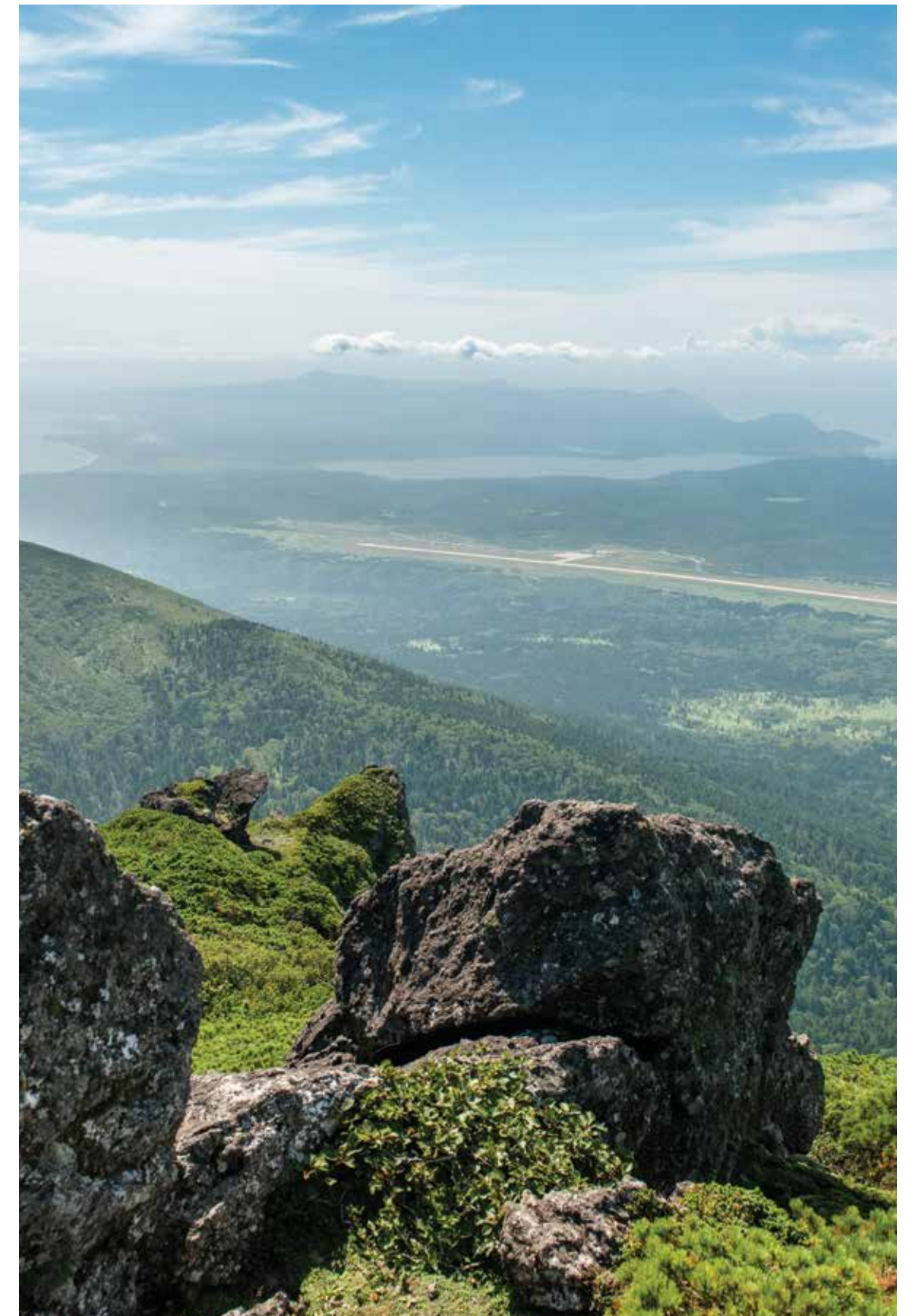




In the center of town a new Orthodox church has been built. On many of the buildings satellite dishes can be seen, and new housing estates are almost completed. Such urban modernity gets somewhat abruptly offset by the occasional... cow being walked to and fro by a babushka ☺.

The town is dotted with several police outposts. The officers like to check documents, breathalyze, and in other ways maintain law and order. The locals told us they weren't on the take too; just as well – if ever they did get any ideas about taking bribes, the whole town would know about it in an instant!

Not far from Yuzhno-Kurilsk there's an airport. It's very new and there are flights to Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk daily. All the same, locals prefer taking the ferry to the mainland – if it's not too stormy. It's slower but cheaper, and there's the chance of meeting interesting people while relishing the leisurely journey ☺.





And That's That!

I have to tell you about the town's restaurant we wanted to eat at – but didn't!...

We were intending to have dinner in the restaurant in the center we'd seen earlier in the day. But when we got there we were told that it's really an *after-dinner* kinda place – 'after-dinner' meaning *no* dinner, just lots of booze, so... "please, if you wouldn't mind... kindly... sling your hook!", or words to similar effect. They sure value custom here, we thought!

It was a blessing in disguise however: the café in our hotel turned out to be a real gem of a gastronomical find. Both nights we were served there all kinds of interesting local fresh seafood dishes: scallops the size of your palm, similarly massive shrimps and crabs... not to mention the several kilos of caviar. Yum!

And after our second feast at the hotel's café, the next thing on the agenda for us was... – boo! – heading home: our Kuril vacation had reached its end. Soon we were headed for Sakhalin from where we took a plane back home. We decided against flying out of Kunashir as the weather is just too unpredictable there and flight delays could have occurred.

In all, a fantastic trip – as you'll have gathered by my enthusiastic commentary and 'what's not to like? – kinda!' photos). I definitely want to get back to the Kurils, and next time it'll be more streamlined and 'best bits' after cutting our teeth on the Kurils this – our first – time.

In the meantime, I decided to get my impressions – and pics – down on paper so as not forget any of it, and of course to be able tell you all about these unique islands so you might want to check them out for yourself, which I heartily recommend!



Eugene Kaspersky

An Extraordinary Expedition to the Kurils

20 days touring the remote
far-eastern islands

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