

A World of Mountains, Yet to Conquer: The Kamchatka Peninsula

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Source: Mountain Research and Development, 22(2) : 191-193

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: [https://doi.org/10.1659/0276-4741\(2002\)022\[0191:AWOMYT\]2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1659/0276-4741(2002)022[0191:AWOMYT]2.0.CO;2)

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A World of Mountains, Yet to Conquer: The Kamchatka Peninsula

The northeasternmost part of Russia, one of the last “undiscovered” regions in the world, still contains unconquered peaks. This part of the world, referred to as the Russian Far East, features a multitude of plateaus and mountain ranges covering at least 75% of its territory.

Kamchatka is a remote peninsula, bounded by Chukotka to the north, the Pacific Ocean to the east, and the Sea of Okhotsk to the south. It is a place that still requires the traveler to have an adventurous spirit and the ability to put up with certain rigors. Because the peninsula faces the United States, it was of significant military value during the Cold War Era and its territory was closed until 1992, to foreigners and Russians alike. A nuclear submarine base can still be found on the shores of one of the deepest natural bays in the world, where the major city Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy is located. The closure of Kamchatka coincidentally resulted in the preservation of a large ecologically pristine wilderness area populated by numerous land and marine animals, including the largest population of grizzly bears in the world.

Kamchatka has more than 120 volcanoes, 29 of which are active, changing the landscape periodically. At 4750 m, Kluchevskoye is the best-known, highest, and most perfectly formed volcano in Eastern Asia, erupting frequently, continuously changing its altitude. In 1996, an eruption of Mount Karymsky caused such an uplift that a nearby lake almost disappeared.

The only transportation to most volcanic areas is by a large MI-8 hel-

icopter, with seating for about 18 people. Although this is a great way to travel, with large portholes offering astounding views of magnificent, mostly snow-capped volcanoes, it is also very expensive. Some interesting volcanoes, such as Mutnovsky (see cover photo of this issue and Figure 1) and Gorely, each with multiple craters, are located closer to the city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy, making it possible for travelers on restricted budgets to enjoy their spectacular views and features. Accommodations in these areas consist of simple wooden lodges and cabins normally used by research scientists.

Aiming to conserve its pristine wilderness, Kamchatka has established 5 protected areas: the Bystrinsky Nature Park, the Kronotsky Zapovednik, the Nalychevo Nature Park, the Southern Kamchatka Nature Park, and the South-

ern Kamchatka State Nature Reserve. *Zapovedniks* (preserves) allow only limited access in their buffer zones. The Kronotsky Zapovednik is the most renowned of all the preserves, specifically because of its Valley of the Geysers, a narrow, vegetation-covered canyon with all sizes of geysers and mud pots. Nalychevo Nature Park, much more open to travelers, is surrounded by 5 volcanoes and offers spectacular beauty and a range of active recreation.

A wide range of ecotourism resources

Current ecotourism development centers on more than the magnificent landscape and natural resources. As early as 1990, even before Kamchatka was officially opened to foreign visitors, small groups interested in indigenous cultures traveled to Esso, a center for



FIGURE 1 The active volcanic Mt Mutnovsky area in Kamchatka attracts scientists and ecotourists. (Photo by Alexander Dyakov, courtesy of The Lost World)

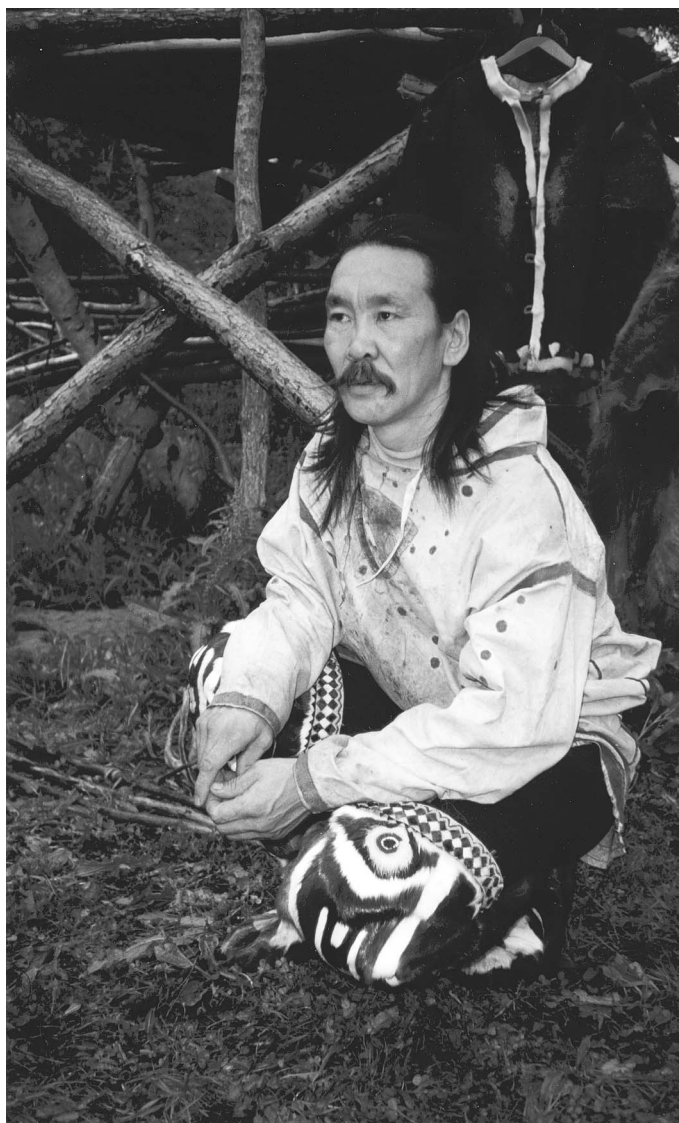


FIGURE 2 Ecotourist trips are an opportunity for tourists to learn about the destination and its people and for local communities to have a share of benefits. An Even reindeer herder explains his way of life to tourists. (Photo by Dan Svenson)

the Even and Koryak native peoples (Figure 2). The initial tourism package was an Even celebration held on the grounds of a small wooden museum, with a subsequent visit to a nearby reindeer herd in the tundra.

Now, even the local administration sees the benefit of supporting the renewal and resurgence of native culture and traditions, not only for the traveler, but also to support the native population. Martha Madsen, an Alaska native now working in Kamchatka and with Explore/Kamchatka, a local travel company, relates that native festivals are being reinstated as European travelers show greater interest. Native groups from Sosnovka, an

Ittel'men settlement in the Yelizovo District close to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy, have recently built a *bala-gan* or high-peaked roof dwelling in a birch forest with the help of the Yelizovo Administration. Native Ittel'men guides also conduct walks in the forest, pointing out herbs and plants used for medicinal purposes.

Hunters and fishermen were also part of the first wave of travelers to Kamchatka. Dramatic changes in these activities have taken place in the past years, as the economic need for foreign currency was replaced by a concern for a slowly decreasing bear population. Bear hunting licenses are now restricted

to less than 100 annually. In addition, hunting by helicopter, a savage way to kill bears, has been stopped. Fishing, one of the fastest-growing sports, is allowed only by the catch-and-release method.

Trekking, hiking, mountaineering, wildlife observation, and cultural ecotourism programs are booming in Kamchatka, mostly catering to Europeans from Germany, Denmark, England, Scotland, Ireland, and Italy, who have relatively easy and economical access to the destination and longer vacation periods and are happy with basic infrastructure.

Issues and obstacles

A travel restriction that Kamchatka shares with Alaska is its weather and short summer season. Rapidly changing weather conditions can make a trekking tour a pretty soggy and cold experience or affect visitors' pickup by a helicopter from a remote location. As local operators become more aware of foreign expectations, these occurrences can actually be beneficial, as they allow room for alternatives in case of bad weather. In some cases, this has led to surprisingly interesting encounters that sometimes surpassed the experience on the scheduled itinerary.

Ecotourism operators in Kamchatka are by far the most sophisticated in the Russian Far East. This refers not only to their operational skills but also to the fact that they understand travelers' concerns and are easy to communicate with. Most of this is because of the growing interest of foreigners, which gives the operators opportunities to learn firsthand what travelers are interested in and what logistical infrastructure is necessary. So far, infrastructure development has been appropriate to demand: no fancy hotels, casinos, or other entertainment palaces are being built, as has happened in the more accessible areas of Khabarovsk and Vladivostok. Part of this is because of the unabated interest of ecological and conserva-

tion-minded organizations that keep a close watch on future development and, in some cases, are in charge of the purse strings. But to a great extent, it is because of the intuitive or wilderness-oriented outlook of the Kamchatka people, who are extremely attached to the place they live in and use their innate knowledge to prevent overdevelopment.

In general, decisions on land use are made by the government. There have been a few cases where entrepreneurs have gone to the government to seek approval. One example is the development of a campsite around the natural hot springs in Malki. The entrepreneur's plan included measures to exclude cars on the campground to limit damage to the fragile earth surrounding the springs, employ local people on the campground, use a specific trash collection system, etc.

Most development, however, is undertaken by large corporations such as Krechet, consisting mainly of former government employees who, through their past relationships, can get easy approval for projects. The natural lodge concept was introduced by this company,

and they have duplicated it in various important ecotourism areas. Other projects, such as the lodge at Nalychevo Park, have been constructed with funds generated through foreign funding organizations. One smaller private company, also very well connected with the government, has constructed a small lodge outside Yelizovo.

Marketing the lodges is a challenge for all these companies. They generally partner with established foreign ecotourism operators, who then do the marketing for them. In some cases, the lodge has then taken over the marketing, using the contacts brought to them by the foreign partner—not without some resentment.

The term "ecotourism" is widely used in Kamchatka but "nature tourism" would be a more accurate term. Methodology and logistics in Kamchatka need a lot more refining to meet internationally accepted standards of ecotourism. The principle that the land is theirs to protect and conserve is still a brand new idea for local people and will need some time to take hold. Much of the foreign investment by environmental nongovernmental organizations in Kamchatka is geared

toward working with grassroots movements to create greater awareness of and attention to the fragile environment.

Kamchatka's government early on saw ecotourism as an industry that could benefit the local economy and support preservation and conservation of the most fragile parts of the territory. They are generally very supportive of this industry, facilitating its growth. Although some permits are still difficult to obtain, there are generally few obstacles when working with an established firm or research institute on programs that operate regularly. A much greater restriction on the growth of ecotourism is the very complex system of high taxes, which each company tries to avoid by asking for cash payments.

As Kamchatka develops, one hopes that it will remain one of Earth's last wildernesses, open to careful exploration while keeping its unique character and preserving its ecosystem for future generations.

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