

Kamchatka—mixture of southern Alaska’s past and future

by Ed Berg

I recently took a trip across the North Pacific to visit another northern peninsula—the Kamchatka Peninsula. When we flew into the coastal capital Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski, we could see several Redoubt-sized volcanoes dominating the landscape. These volcanoes are part of an arc of volcanoes running down the spine of Kamchatka toward Japan. To the north, this volcanic arc extends to Alaska through the Aleutian chain and the Alaska Peninsula. It’s all the same geology, with the Pacific tectonic plate diving under continental plates on both sides of the ocean. When the plate reaches a depth of about 100 kilometers (62 miles), it starts to melt and feeds the volcanoes overhead, which creates the same kind of spectacular scenery that Kamchatkans and Alaskans love so well.

During the Soviet period Kamchatka was closed to foreigners and indeed to most Russians because of the harbor and submarine base in Avacha Bay where Petropavlovsk is situated. In the last decade, however, Kamchatka has been opened up, and ecotourism is one of the most promising venues for economic development. The country is strikingly beautiful, but it is much less developed than Alaska. There is basically one rough road down the center of the peninsula, with offshoots to small villages. Remote travel is by helicopter and all-terrain trucks. There is no developed network of trails, and visitors need to hire a guide service for vehicles and logistical support. You don’t just rent an RV and drive down the road to a nice campground in Kamchatka.

There are large parks and wildlife refuges in Kamchatka, but critics say that they exist primarily on paper because the government doesn’t provide enough money or staff to enforce the rules. Poaching is rampant, and in a dirt-poor economy it is impossible to prevent at least subsistence harvest of wildlife by local residents. More ominous is the large-scale black market in brown bear gall bladders for traditional Chinese medicine. We were told that upwards of 2000 brown bears are poached every year, simply for their gall bladders, which can bring several thousand dollars on the black market.

One rather bazaar form of poaching consists of harvesting salmon for the roe. The Russians make ex-

cellent red caviar out of salmon roe, and I must admit that I ate quite a bit of it on several occasions. We saw photographs of large piles of salmon carcasses where the helicopter-borne poachers had simply stripped the roe from the salmon and discarded the meat. This illegal industry—together with salmon poached for meat—generates an estimated \$1 billion a year in Russia, and threatens to decimate what was once thought to be an inexhaustible supply of salmon. There are innumerable streams coming off the Kamchatka Peninsula and they generate approximately one fourth of the wild Pacific salmon stocks. These pristine streams are probably like the salmon streams of our Pacific Northwest at the time of Lewis and Clark.

On the positive side I am glad to see that people on both sides of the Pacific are beginning to appreciate salmon red caviar. Black Russian caviar was traditionally made from sturgeon roe from the Caspian Sea. The most caviar favored by connoisseurs comes from the Beluga sturgeon, which is now an endangered species, due to virtually unrestricted fishing since the end of Soviet control in 1990. The development of a legal red caviar industry will hopefully take the pressure off sturgeon and provide highly palatable caviar at a much lower price.

I often complain to my wife Sara about throwing away the roe as we are cleaning our salmon. I think that next year I will go into full caviar production and let her take care of the filleting. Red caviar is a treat not to be wasted!

The occasion of my visit to Kamchatka was as a member of a sister city delegation from Homer, Alaska to Yelizovo, Kamchatka. Homer has a sister city relationship with Yelizovo, and several exchanges from both sides have occurred since the mid-1990s. Yelizovo is a town of about 50,000 souls, located inland about 20 miles from the much larger port of Petropavlovsk, which is about the size of Anchorage. As an official sister city delegation, we were given the red carpet tour by the mayor’s staff and members of the local Rotary chapter. We visited schools, hospitals, museums, a mineral water bottling plant, a fish hatchery, and enjoyed a couple of good soaks in local hot springs.

Everyone that we met was very friendly and help-

ful, and we made some good friendships that we would like to continue in future years. Rotary organizer Steve Yoshida and retiring Homer mayor Jack Cushing had made several previous trips to the area, so they reconnected with old friends, including some who had been to Homer and Soldotna on similar visits. Pratt Museum director Heather Beggs and Steve Yoshida interviewed high school students as candidates for Rotary-sponsored student exchanges with Homer High School for next year, so we may once again be seeing some of the younger faces from Yelizovo in our classrooms.

Although many folks spoke some degree of English, we always had an interpreter with us for the official visits. I speak Russian better than I can understand it, so conversations would often develop with me speaking my broken Russian and the other person replying in their broken English. Several years of English language are required in school, so most people have a basic English capability even if they don't try to use it. We met with a high school English class and found the students able to converse pretty well with us. (They wanted to know all about the interests of American teenagers, so we had to kind of wing that one, as most of us were beyond the age of having teenagers at home anymore.)

The collapse of the Soviet Union has not made life easy in this far outpost of the Russian world. In the old days the government was the main employer and people had a great deal of job security, even if they couldn't buy a lot of desirable goods with their money. Nowadays there are nice consumer goods on the shelves, but people don't have much money to buy them. Shopping in Yelizovo revealed prices not much cheaper than Alaska, yet a doctor or a teacher only makes \$150-200 a month. Most people live in rundown Soviet-era rectangular concrete apartment buildings and don't have the money to keep them well painted. (We will know that things have really changed in Russia when Home Depot sets up shop in Yelizovo.)

In spite of the low incomes, people are amazingly well dressed. The beautiful young women are typically dressed in skirts and heels and looked like they just stepped off the pages of the latest U.S. fashion magazine. Men generally wear slacks and often leather jackets, not the blue jeans and hiking boots so popular in Alaska. I wore a nice Harris Tweed sport coat everyday and never felt overdressed. If I wore such attire in Alaska, people would ask me if I were going to a wedding or a funeral.

The new market economy is slowly taking hold, but it seems to be a foreign idea. In the past the opportunity to start your own business simply didn't exist, so there is not yet a culture of small business operators that can educate one another. Necessity being the mother of invention, however, businesses are beginning to emerge to take over some of the services that the government simply abandoned with the collapse of the publicly-owned socialist economy. Some business people are obviously doing quite well, to judge from their well-polished late model cars.

The recent affluence, I must say, was much more noticeable in Vladivostok, where we stopped for a day in route to Kamchatka. Vladivostok is a major port; it is the gateway to Russian Far East, analogous to Seattle and the Pacific Northwest. Building is going on all over Vladivostok at a furious pace and there are many well-polished late model cars on the busy streets.

When I returned home I sat down and wrote a short proposal for a Russian language school for tourists, modeled after the popular tourist-based Spanish language schools in Central America. Yelizovo would be a great place for such a school, because travelers could combine Russian language study with activities such as mountain trekking, fishing, hunting, marine wildlife cruises, and in the winter with excellent downhill and cross-country skiing. I am hoping that some aspiring entrepreneur will pick up this ball and run with it, and that I can return as a student.

I am also eager to return to Kamchatka to see some of the wild parts, and to study the botany and geology, as well to visit some of my new friends. On a longer scale, however, I worry about how Kamchatka will be developed in the coming decades. A lot of damage was done to fragile environments in Alaska and the Lower-48 during the early years of resource extraction, as well as by military operations during the Cold War. Kamchatka was lucky to escape some of the worst environmental abuses of the Soviet era, but like Alaska it could be trashed very quickly if people are not vigilant about protecting the environment.

Russia has some good environmental regulations on the books, but the government lacks the political will to enforce them. In the U.S. we have a long tradition of strong grassroots conservation and environmental movements that pressure Congress and government agencies to protect the environment. Imperfect as it is, this is our system of checks and balances. This system was only beginning to develop in 1904, for example, when forester William Langille recom-

mended to Teddy Roosevelt that the Federal government set aside most of the Kenai Peninsula as a forest and wildlife reserve to protect fragile environmental resources. It took another 37 years of grassroots conservation activism to establish the Kenai National Moose Range in 1941, and many more years of activism to pass the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) which created the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge in its modern form.

Today there is a wide variety of citizen groups, ranging from the Safari Club to the Sierra Club that have strong stake in the well-being of the Kenai Refuge. This kind of grassroots infrastructure is only beginning to develop in Russia today, and especially in remote Kamchatka. It's a race to see if the environmental forces can grow fast enough to counterbalance the frontier mentality of unrestricted development and "the devil take the hindmost" characteristic of newly released capitalist energy.

Oil and gas have been found offshore on the west side of Kamchatka in the Sea of Okhotsk, in Tertiary sedimentary formations very similar to the reservoir rocks of Cook Inlet. On-shore infrastructure and a proposed 470-kilometer gas pipeline across Kamchatka (crossing 20 rivers) could seriously impact pristine salmon habitat, as well as open up a pipeline road conduit for salmon poachers. A large gold deposit was discovered within the Bystrinsky Nature Park, and subsequently the Park boundary was redrawn 50 kilometers

inside the Park to allow for mine development. Does all of this sound like Alaska 50 years ago? Or today, for that matter?

In a world of rapidly growing population and ever-shrinking spaces, there are few pristine wilderness areas left on Earth. We human beings value these places for their wild beauty and we seek them out, even if only in our minds' eye in books and video nature programs. In my opinion, the long-range value to the human race of a wild Kamchatka or the high country in the Alaska mountains is the beauty that these places can bring to the eye of the beholders. This wild beauty is a marketable asset, and if it is protected, people will be always pay good money to see it, especially in an evermore crowded world. A pulse of hydrocarbons or a few tons of precious metals are nice, but long after these commodities are gone, human beings will still be searching for wild beauty, and paying good money to experience it.

Information about travel in Kamchatka can be found at: <http://www.explorekamchatka.com/index.html>. Kamchatka's environmental issues are discussed at: <http://www.pbs.org/edens/kamchatka/bountiful.html#rahr>.

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