

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky  
Russia

Mr. Peter Bird Martin, Executive Director  
The Institute of Current World Affairs  
4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

Although I spend most of my time writing dry, depressing articles about Kamchatka's fishing industry, there is more going on here than endless economic problems, political crisis, and general misery. Russia deceives; her contrasts are unsolvable riddles, holding the keys to her loveliest, most mysterious, and breathtaking charms. I have always thought the Russian steam bath, or *banya*, Russia's perfect symbol. In a proper *banya*, the Russians force you to swelter in extreme wet heat in a tiny, airless room until your skin turns pink and the sweat rolls off your body in rivers. Then, just as you are ready to suffocate, they chase you outdoors and make you dive into an icy-cold stream, or roll around in the snow. The barbaric process of repeatedly subjecting yourself to these contrasting agonies somehow creates a deep glow of well-being. When the *banya* session ends, as it must, with a small feast of *zakuski* (little treats like homemade smoked salmon and marinated mushrooms) and a few shots of bracingly cold vodka, the unsuspecting Westerner may suddenly find an irresistible urge to *obrusit*--to Russify, to give up the dubious comforts of 7-11s and cable television for this wonderfully strange world. At this point, the singing usually begins, along with slobbering toasts to grandmothers and international friendship, and things may get a little out of hand, but that's part of it too. You get drawn into it.

Kamchatka, like all of Russia, has its own hidden mysteries and charms to take your breath away. It draws you in when you least expect it. As far as city planning and architecture goes, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky has got to be one of the most wretched cities on the planet; but climb up any one of the steep hills lining Avacha Bay, and suddenly there are sun-dappled groves of stone birch and magnificent views of volcanoes, distant mountains, and the sea. Kamchatka, like an extravagant and eccentric beauty, hides herself behind veils of fog, mist, and rain, and lives in secret

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valleys. Clear days are rare here. The stunning landscapes the peninsula offers must be sought with diligence, and only the patient get the final reward.

Over the past few years, Kamchatka has earned a well-deserved reputation as a worthwhile tourist destination, but only for those who loathe comfort and seek the exotic. My friends here tell me that when Kamchatka was a *zona*--a closed zone open only to military personnel and people with special passports--intrepid Russian adventurers would think up elaborate ruses to gain access to this mysterious land of geysers and bears. Now Western tourists can come and see for themselves. These are mostly adventure travellers--hard-core journeyers to distant lands, the more unknown the better. Adventure travel has turned into a big business on Kamchatka. This summer endless caravans of yuppie thrill-seekers trooped through this most remote corner of Russia seeking 'fun with a purpose'. They paid huge sums to fish for grayling and salmon, shoot bear and moose, and ski or climb Kamchatka's volcanoes.

Adventure travellers, of course, may get something quite different than what they expected or bargained for during their journey to Kamchatka. Unplanned events, the only dependable constant of real Russian life, overtake foreigners in this part of the world as mercilessly as they do average Russians, muddle things up, and turn even the most carefully planned excursions into Napoleon's retreat. A group of Swiss alpinists came this summer to go mountain climbing near *Klyuchevskoi*, an actively erupting volcano. Unfortunately for them, snow melt from the volcano caused all the rivers in the vicinity to rise. Their *vezdekhod*, a mighty six-wheel all-terrain vehicle, got stuck a mud flow thirty miles from the volcano. The Swiss sat marooned in a featureless, mosquito-infested bog for a week until their guides, who walked for days back to the nearest town, could come back with a tractor to haul them away. All trips are subject to immediate cancellation, with no refunds.

But I like the random element of travel in Russia, and on Kamchatka especially; it increases the chances of something interesting happening, and reminds the traveller that this part of the world is still wild, and not always subject to the will of human beings. The best trips here always include just enough random elements to make you uncertain of the outcome, and while the final reward for days of discomfort and inconvenience may not always be the experience of a lifetime, it will at least be memorable, and, like hitting yourself on the head with a hammer, it feels soooo good when you stop.

### **THE FATE THAT BEFALLS MARINERS**

Nothing like a boat trip along Kamchatka's Pacific coast to break up the monotony of city life. I was invited to spend a few days on the water by Pat and Baiba Morrow. Pat and Baiba are Canadian alpinists. Their job is to go climbing in the world's remote places, then make films or write books about their wild alpine adventures. They have climbed in North and South America, Russia, Europe, Nepal, New Guinea, Kenya, and the South Pole. Pat has been to the South Pole four times, and is the first person in the world to have stood on the highest points of each of the Earth's seven continents. He wrote about the

latter exploit in his lovely book, Beyond Everest, which I managed to look through only after they left Kamchatka. Baiba, an accomplished mountaineer in her own right, climbed some of the seven highest summits with Pat, and contributes pictures and text for their projects. They were in Kamchatka climbing and researching an article about the high peaks of the Pacific Rim for the Canadian adventure magazine Equinox, heard my name from a friend, and called to invite me onto a boat they chartered for a few days.

We met at 9 o'clock one morning and drove down to the docks. Pat and Baiba didn't look like remarkably accomplished mountaineers, just remarkably cheerful people. Both were dressed in hard-used Patagonia clothes, Pat slim, sunburned, and smiling, and Baiba compact, sunburned, and smiling. They had just come back to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky following weeks of storming Kamchatka's volcanic heights and wanted a little R&R on the water. "A few nice, relaxing days, just fishing and exploring the coast," said Baiba.

We were unloading gear from the car when our vessel, a blue 30-footer whose only outstanding feature was a windowless white cabin resembling an icebox, spluttered up and nudged into the old tires of the wharf. A short, grimy-dark man in a striped Russian sailor's shirt came striding out of a nearby shack and walked up to us. "I am Rustam," he said in passable English. "I think now we go, but I must to call, uh, *pogranichniki*..." "The Border Guard," I tried. "Yes, yes...I let them know we go," he said and ran off.

After a few minutes, Rustam came striding up, frowning and making dialing motions with one finger in the air next to one ear. "No telephone, only beep-beep-beep an hour, I can't call *pogranichniki*. We go, *vsye ravno*." He motioned us aboard his boat. "My friends call, I hope." This could be a problem, I realized; because of the nuclear submarines from the naval base at Primorsky, the Russian Navy strictly controls vessel traffic in and out of Avacha Bay. I had a sudden vision of us caught, red-handed, filming *Akula*-class missile boats with Pat's video cameras. "Maybe you could call them on the radio," I suggested. "I would," said Rustam fussily, "But my boat has no radio."

On board we met Captain Rustam's mates; Lyova, Rustam's broad-faced, smiling brother-in-law, and silent Kolya. We only later found out neither had never been to sea before. "What's your boat named?" Baiba asked Rustam. "*Sinni Kalmar*...Blue, uh.." Rustam looked at me. "The Blue Squid," I said. "She goes six knots, good for trip," said Rustam. And so we sailed forth on the Blue Squid, illegal and radioless, into the wide, bounding North Pacific.

We left Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky from near the docks of one of Kamchatka's biggest deepwater fishing companies, AO *Akros*. This end of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky is vintage, rustbucket Russia; a land of rundown warehouses and dirt roads, a trashed, exhausted shoreline blighted by neglected docks and discarded ships. A dozen ancient vessels--deep-water factory trawlers and crab boats, barges and trampers--were tied up

idle along the docks at SRV, the Lenin Shipyards. The three huge smokestacks of TETS, the city's gigantic generating plant, loomed above SRV.

Distance gradually softened Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky's dreary, post-Socialist cityscape as the Blue Squid puttered out into Avacha Bay proper. Yellow, pink and gray apartment buildings faded into block shapes against the green hills, and we traversed a semi-wild stretch of water. The first seals appeared, looking at us curiously with black puppy eyes before diving out of sight. We crossed the Bay and inspected the cliffs on the opposite shore; at a gray gneiss formation called 'The Grotto', Rustam, Baiba and I took a rubber raft and rode the tide inside to explore its soaring, bell-shaped inner chamber. On the hillside behind The Grotto, we spotted an eagle on a distant birch tree.

By the time the Blue Squid hit the open ocean, we all felt pretty good. There was a nice salt breeze, sunshine broke through the clouds in angelic shafts, and the sea had a friendly roll to it. We halted briefly to fish for Pacific Ocean perch, or rockfish. Fishing for rockfish is easy--you take a weighted line, bait two or three hooks with half-rotten *kolbasa* bits, and throw the whole mess into the water. Baiba caught the first rockfish within 25 seconds. Ten minutes later we had eight, pop-eyed brown fish stuffed into a plastic bag. Happy with our fishing, we tootled farther down the coast to a pair of seastacks. Thousands and thousands of gulls, comorants and puffins congregated on the steep cliffs, filling the air with raucous noise. Pat took the rubber raft in close and scrambled up a short cliff to take pictures. Outraged gulls bombed him from above with pebbles.

From the seastacks we went on south to Starichkov Island. Starichkov Island, about a mile long and a half-mile wide, is ringed with hundred foot high cliffs. The upper two-thirds of the island are covered with grasses, scrub alders and thick vegetation--from a distance, with clouds of birds flying around it, the island looked like a Dr. Seuss drawing of a hat. The scenery seemed all the more wild in contrast with the dreary city we had just left behind. We clambered ashore and got close-up views of puffins flying at full speed directly into their nests among the vegetation, crashing into the high grass in a whirl of short wings. Farther south beyond the island the coast became more rugged, with dramatic headlands raked by booming waves. At *Mys Opasnaya*--Cape Perilous--the rusted bow section of an unlucky vessel lay keeled over in the rocks just above the surf line.

We spent the first night camped in fragrant wildflowers, perched atop a steep cape deliniating the Pacific Ocean from the cove. The seaward mountains dropped off deliriously into the surf and were cut by two high, spraying waterfalls. Along the cove, a wall of weirdly-eroded white cliffs, their shapes suggesting pagodas and stupas, disappeared in and out of the slowly blowing mists. The ocean thrummed against the shore below and fogbanks rolled inland.

We pitched our tents and ran down to the beach for dinner. Dinner featured a main course of fresh rockfish *ukha*, cooked on a driftwood campfire. Making *ukhais* easy--take five or six fresh fish, gut them (leaving on the head, scales, bones and fins), wash them

thoroughly in seawater, and throw them into a large pot with about a gallon of water, a bunch of peeled potatoes, a handful of salt and pepper, a bay leaf, onions and garlic. Boil 20 minutes. The head, scales, bones and fins give *ukha* the appearance of rapidly decomposing shark chum, but local connoisseurs place this dish high in the exalted ranks of the Russian Far East's regional haute cuisine. *Ukha* may look like fish soup, Rustam explained to me, but it is in no way just fish soup. "To have real *ukha*, you have to have this," he smiled and pulled out a bottle of vodka. "Without this, *ukha* is just fish soup."

The next day we continued south to our final destinations, Vilyuchinsky and Zhirovaya Bays. These bays indent Kamchatka's Southeast coastline in a rough W-shape, and are separated by a low rugged cape and dangerous reefs. Our plan was to go ashore in Zhirovaya Bay and march inland to some hot springs, where we would camp out for the night.

These bays, I later found out, gained infamy in Kamchatkan maritime history over a century and a half ago. The Russian explorer K.T. Khlebnikov recorded a disastrous shipwreck in Vilyuchinsky Bay in November, 1811:

"The vessel *Yunona* suffered a wreck at the mouth of the Viyulya River during a mighty storm, during which the ship's captain and the ship's crew perished, excepting for three sailors saved unexpectedly. They found some of our fishermen and were returned (to Petropavlovsk) by them. I was horrified by the lamentable and grievous news. The next day we set off in rowboats to the place of the shipwreck, and what a shocking picture it presented to us! The high tide inundated the Viyulya for more than three versts (note: a verst equals 3500 feet, or about 1.06 kilometers), and all along its length we found dead bodies dragged up by the tide, or their dismembered and mutilated parts, rolled in sand and seaweed; some of these we found hanging in trees. But the most horrible of all was to see an arm or leg which had been ripped out and trapped in a crack in the rocks, or a leg or arm or even an entire body dangling in the air. Nine bodies were collected and buried. The fate that had befallen these mariners touched us to the bottom of our hearts." <sup>1</sup>

The Blue Squid pattered slowly along the base of the eerie white cliffs we had seen the previous evening. The terrain was fierce, northern, exploding with life, pitiless. Volcanic stone pagodas and stupas topped fearsome knife-edged ridges of pale rock, buttressed by dark gneiss dikes and guarded by thousands of nesting gulls. Pebble and rock avalanches rattled down into the intervening gullies. The hillsides everywhere held hanging gardens filled with mosses, stone birches, and masses of purple, red, and white wildflowers. The passage to Zhirovaya Bay seemed magical in the flat light. There were dozens of seals in the translucent gray sea; they would bob halfway out of the water, get a good look at us, and glide away underwater like darts, only to reappear behind the Blue Squid as soon as she safely passed. Two rare White-breasted Kamchatkan Eagles, an

endangered species listed in Russia's *Krasnaya Kniga* (Red Book of Rare and Protected Animals), soared along the cliffs, looking for food.

We had dropped anchor and were packing for our hike when a motorboat came knifing through the water towards us. Three grim-faced fishermen looked impassively at us. They cut the motor and came along the Blue Squid. "Hey, you guys want a crab?" shouted one of them, suddenly holding up a huge Kamchatka crab. The crab waved its legs feebly in the air. "How much?" asked Rustam. "Got a bottle of anything onboard?" yelled the fisherman, "We'll trade." Rustam grabbed a bottle, and a fair swap was made--a live crab for a bottle of *Russkaya* vodka. We were delighted. The fishermen roared away, smiling and happy. Free economic activity works with a wonderful efficiency in Kamchatka's outback. The only one who didn't benefit was the crab. Once we got ashore, I cut his legs off and threw his body into the surf.

Lyova and Kolya stayed behind to keep watch on the Blue Squid, while Rustam, Pat, Baiba and I set off for the hot springs. I was sure the woods would be wet, and wanted to wear my high rubber deck boots, but Rustam talked me out of it. "We'll walk the whole way on a road, so just wear your sneakers," Rustam directed us. "There's no need for those heavy boots." We walked through a field, found the road, and headed inland on a wide, muddy track leading through jungle-like vegetation. Tall grasses and towering Queen Anne's lace grew to eight feet high in places. The air tasted thick with chlorophyll. Within minutes, we found ourselves standing at the edge of a forty yard-long puddle of foot-deep water, with no path around. We looked at Rustam, who only shrugged and grinned. We marched straight into the water, guaranteeing ourselves wet feet for the rest of our trip.

After two hours of pleasant woods walking, including a waist-deep ford across the Zhirovaya River, we came to a geologist's camp. The two grizzled *Kamchatrybvod*<sup>2</sup> hydrogeologists at the camp looked like hobos. Chain-smoking, they explained that they were measuring the river flow on the Zhirovaya to assess the environmental impact of a new salmon hatchery, part of the Russian-Japanese joint venture, *Kamchatka-Pilengogodo*. Construction is slated to begin next year, and the big bosses had all been out recently, looking around with their Japanese clients. The two hydrogeologists treated us to tea and salmon *ukha* (same as rockfish *ukha*, but redder) in exchange for a bit of vodka.

The hydrogeologist's camp consisted of a rundown barracks, an open-air wood stove, and a chicken coop; it was utterly squalid, littered with tin cans, paper, and bottles, and crawling with mangy dogs and skinny cats. After the parade of bosses and Japanese visitors in the past months, it was obvious three scruffy North Americans barely deserved notice. The hydrogeologists mainly talked with Rustam about the salmon fishing in the river. Good fishing, good run of native pinks, they said. I finally asked them if they thought the Zhirovaya had enough water to support a salmon hatchery. "Sure, sure," one said. "And anyway, even if it doesn't, this is where everyone wants to build it, so what's the difference? We just want to get out of here before the snows start."

After socializing, we ambled off towards the hot springs. The road ended, and we came to a clearing with four or five huts scattered around its perimeter. We entered the kitchen building and found graffiti and business cards left there the previous year by some German bear hunters. The hunting camp looked too clean and well-organized for Russia, but it was just the kind of place clients paying more than \$10,000 for the privilege bear hunting in the back of beyond would expect to see. Primitive but comfortable.

A cloud of white smoke floating above the trees marked the hot springs from almost a half-mile away. We hurried towards them through the woods and again forded across the braided Zhirovaya. We came out into a lush meadow at the bottom of a cup of green mountains. Steam belled into the air from the main spring, which had an iron pump plugged into it. White steam tendrils spun into the air from scores of minor seeps and vents. The hot springs were far from wild, but were immaculately clean. There were wooden plank paths from the tenting and campfire area leading to the bathing tub, and a winter cabin heated by thermal water piped in from the main spring.

Camping at a hot spring is a Kamchatkan art form. A certain, delicate balance must be struck, whereby the bather avoids overcooking in the hot spring while maintaining a steady intake of food and beverage. Bathing in open air, in as natural a setting as possible, is imperative. The Zhirovaya Hot Springs' centerpiece is a four foot deep, five-by-twelve wooden hot tub, sunk into the earth and lined with unfinished grey boards. We filled the hot tub with steaming mineral water and got in for the first session, or *seance*, as Russians say.

In the tub, Rustam told us the water at these hot springs is renowned for its perfect temperature and high mineral content. "Lots of beneficial salts," he muttered periodically. "You can stay in this water for hours and not feel exhausted. It's not like the hot springs in Paratunka (a popular resort area near Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky), more than an hour in the water there and you feel really tired." Our first, hour-long seance concluded, we celebrated by cooking our crab legs and a pot of rice in the boiling water of the main hot spring and feasting in the gathering nightfall.

Multiple hot spring *seances* followed, and after Pat and Baiba went to bed, Rustam and I wound up lolling around in hot, beneficial mineral water until well after midnight. New to the tourist business, Rustam was eager to hear my views on what Western tourists expect from their Russian guides. We discussed his possibilities--Rustam had picked up the Blue Squid for a song the year before, something like five thousand rubles when the ruble was three hundred to the dollar, and he wanted badly to corner the market in what he called *morskoi turizm*--marine tourism, an unoccupied niche in Kamchatka's growing tourist industry. I had to admit he had a good package for adventurous people who don't mind getting wet and dirty. The Blue Squid didn't go very fast, but then hurrying through the dramatic landscape of cliffs and pounding surf would miss the point. Rustam also had something original to offer; most tourists visiting Kamchatka helicopter to the Valley of the Geysers for a few hours at \$100.00 a head, hunt and fish, or slog up and down volcanoes. Few go out to explore Kamchatka's spectacular coastline, and Rustam's costs

(\$120.00/day for boat and crew, plus all the *ukha* you ever wanted) seemed reasonable enough.

Dreamy after soaking for hours in the hot springs in the square wooden tub, we retired to our tent. Rustam, excited from his success with his foreign clients, couldn't sleep. We lay there in the dark, Rustam picking my brain. "You could figure out something to cook to give your clients," I offered. "You know, make something tasty for them to eat. Something quick and easy. Clients like to be given food." "Da, da, da, da," agreed Rustam, picking up on the thought, "Something hot, like noodles."

Emboldened by our conversation, Rustam whispered his top-secret plans for developing his unique brand tourism on Kamchatka. "I'm going to build a marina in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky," he confided. "The City Administration will grant me a building permit any day now, and I'll be on my way. Did you see all those sailboats at the dock when you left? They're all mine. I'm going to have the only yacht marina in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky."

"I didn't see any sailboats at the docks," I said.

"They were there, you just didn't see them," pressed Rustam, eyes glittering. "I'll have my own marina. But that's not all."

"In another year or two, I'll get a better motor for the Blue Squid, or buy a faster boat, and then I want to set up a company like I saw in a film about Hawaii," he continued excitedly. "You know, those ones where they take people around on waterskiis and then they lift off into the air on a parachute and fly behind the boat. It'll be the only company like it on Kamchatka, in the whole Russian Far East! Can you imagine it? Going up in the air on a parachute alongside the cliffs, flying among the gulls and puffins..."

"The water here might be a little cold for someone to want to do that," I ventured.

"No matter," insisted Rustam, poking my arm through the sleeping bag. "We can get wetsuits. It'll be beautiful, clients floating in the air..." I had a sudden vision of a Kamchatka fish baron dressed in a white and red polka-dotted bathing-suit and lofting slowly and majestically into the air, like the Bullwinkle float at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade in New York City. Rustam noticed my amusement, and rather heatedly remarked, "You may think it's funny, but I think it will work."

The next day the rains came, and we walked off through the dripping jungle, back along the muddy road to the boat. I emerged, soaking wet, onto the beach three hours later. The surf pounded the shoreline with six-foot breakers, and the sky, low and leaden, spat rain in the gusty wind. Out on anchor, the Blue Squid bobbed wildly in the long swells. If I'm going out there, I thought, I'm going to want something to keep my stomach calm, and chewed a Bonine capsule from my medicine kit. Bonine works very well against



motion sickness, but (I later learned) has stupefying side effects. Pat, Baiba, and Rustam came out onto the beach and trudged my way.

I found my deck boots where I had left them on shore. They were full of water. I emptied them out onto the rocks. Rustam began shouting wildly in the direction of the Blue Squid; finally, Lyova appeared. He heaved the rubber dinghy into the water and rowed towards the rocky shore, disappearing into the wave troughs. "If I go out in that, I'll get seasick," said Pat. I gave him a Bonine capsule too.

"I go first", announced Rustam. We waited as Lyova approached the rocks through the crashing surf. He was goggle-eyed with terror, but brought the raft in safely. Rustam leaped aboard and confusion broke out as the two, cursing and fumbling with the oars, furiously fought the breakers on the way out. They got past the surf, and suddenly their rowing speed increased dramatically. "Looks like the raft is folding in half," observed Baiba, and we watched as the little rubber raft's bow and stern rose gracefully from the water, like butterfly wings. Rustam and Lyova barely reached the Blue Squid before winding up in the drink.

We dejectedly watched them haul the flabby remains of the deflated raft aboard the Blue Squid. "I don't think we'll get anywhere on that raft today," said Baiba. Later we found out they had somehow punctured the raft with one of the oars. We waved and pointed to let Rustam know that we were going to the fisherman's camp a few kilometers away, and set off down the beach in the rain. As we walked, the same motorboat we had seen earlier came out of the river mouth and beelined for the Blue Squid.

The fisherman's camp was on the other side of the river, a tranquil collection of board-and-tarpaper buildings on the first quiet water up the estuary from the river bar. We stood in the rain and waited to be rescued. We could see the Blue Squid driving around aimlessly with the fisherman's motorboat far out in the bay. The surf at the river mouth seemed monstrous, big curling breakers coming in and dashing on the sand. After about an hour of standing around, we watched the fisherman and Rustam come in on the motorboat. The fisherman circled around beyond the outer line of breakers, waiting for enough slack water to run in without capsizing. I counted a chance every ninth wave or so--finally, the fisherman spotted an opening and made a run for it, gliding in flawlessly on the foam of the ninth wave.

The adroit fisherman pulled the motorboat up to the river bank. He had a broad, handsome Slavic face, weathered by years on the water, and smiled warmly to welcome us aboard. "Valerii Alexandrovich," he introduced himself. We were ferried to the encampment, and Valerii led us to one of the buildings.

On the way, Valerii told us he belonged to *Aborigen*, a 'native enterprise' from the Kamchatka Northern People's Association. The fishermen at the camp were all ethnic Russian, and bore no resemblance to any of Kamchatka's native peoples, but Valerii explained that since the enterprises General Director was a pure-blooded *Kamchadal*, the

enterprise could be considered 'native'. Native fishing enterprises receive quotas for various marine products, just like the bigger fishing enterprises in the Kamchatka Region. *Aborigen* had a fifty-ton crab quota, as well as quotas for other marine species, in Vilyuchinskaya and Zhirovaya Bays.

Valerii was in a dither because he had to go to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky but the surf was too rough to get out into the bay. "I flipped over this morning and had to swim the boat in. I don't want to do that again," he said. Valerii was further miffed since his boat was low on oil; a promised supply had arrived, but the requisitions officer in charge of issuing it had taken off up the river with a rifle, a bottle, and a murderous desire to shoot ducks, and would be back "later". It became apparent that we would be late getting back to town, and perhaps not getting back at all; the Blue Squid's six knots might be fine for a calm day, but they were next to useless in even a fair North Pacific storm. The fisherman's boat was faster and far more dependable. Rustam began bartering with him to take us back to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky in his boat in exchange for some boat oil.

We reached the other side of the river and walked up the bank to a row of rough wood huts. A five-foot tall stack of freshly-caught Kamchatka crab stood outside of one. The crab, we were told, was for a delegation of Japanese businessmen who were in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky to sign a joint-venture contract. "We fish, and they process," said Valerii. "It's a good deal all around. The fishing's good." Many of the crabs were still alive in the drizzle, dumbly moving their slow limbs and wiggling their antennae.

We entered the hut. Inside it was dark, dank, and filthy. There was some sort of rude sleeping platform built against the length of one wall. The platform was covered with heaps of bedding and grimy grey pillows. The air smelled richly of fish, sweat, and cheap cigarettes. A heap of dirty rags on the platform stirred upright and two eyes whitely blinked out. "We sleep tonight here," Rustam announced to us. "You guys think you can get the stove going so we can warm up and have some tea?" Another heap on the bed moved and a fat man in a sleeveless tee-shirt rolled into sight, gogging at us with sleep-puffed eyes.

The first heap dug around in his rags, found some matches, and leaned forward to light the stove. The stove, a double-binger welded together from two sections of an old 50-gallon drum and some pipe, looked explosive. The fat man cringed when he saw the matches. "That ever blow up?" I asked. "Once or twice," cackled the heap, and fired it up. There was a loud whomp, and the pipe connecting the drum halves blew picturesque streams of tiny smoke rings out of tiny ventilation holes.

An hour later, Pat, Baiba, and I sat, soaked and warm, vaguely registering our surroundings in the semi-darkness. The Bonine I had taken earlier made me fell froggy. My clothes were wringing wet. I ached. The two *Aborigen* fishermen drew me into interpreting a conversation with Pat and Baiba. The tiny smoke rings the binger pipe emitted reminded them of giant smoke rings blown by the erupting *Klyuchevskoi* volcano. Pat and Baiba had been climbing *Kamen*, a nearby volcano, and swore some of the smoke

rings they saw were over a kilometer across. "And the booms from the volcano's explosions, like bombs going off..." Pat was saying as I croaked along dutifully in Russian, "... *vulkan vsyo shumit kak bombi vzryvaiutsya...*" Suddenly, the door burst open. It was Rustam, wild-eyed in the drenching rain. "Get your stuff," he said, "We're going to make a run for the boats."

We stumbled outside into the drizzly dusk. Minutes later, Pat, Baiba, Rustam and I sat gripped in the motorboat, watching the chaotic waves crisscross at the river bar. We circled around in the estuary. At the helm, Valerii studied the surf, counting waves. After a few circles, he gassed the motor, brought us about, and made a run. The motorboat, overloaded by our weight, plowed ahead sluggishly in the water, and at the last moment before a towering curler, Valerii pulled us around and we headed back towards camp. "No joking with the ocean when it's like this," he said as we pulled the boat into the estuary. "Today, you call him *vi*, not *ti*" We went back to the fisherman's camp, trapped for the night.

The only things to eat at the *Aborigin* camp, it turned out, were bread and Kamchatka crab. No rice, no vegetables, just bread and crab. The fishermen went outside to the crab pile and cut legs for a half an hour while the pot on the stove got to boil. When the pot of crab legs finished cooking we fell on them, famished from not eating all day. The legs were filled with huge, buttery-fat blobs of juicy crustacean. We gobbled. My fingers rubbed raw and tender from cracking crab carapaces. Still, our hosts pressed us on to eat more. "Really great, really great," chanted Rustam. "Have another leg."

The end came swiftly. Blarfed on hot seafood and woozy from Bonine, I retreated, crab-like, into the dampness of my sleeping bag at the platform's far corner. I crawled in, shivered, and fell into a bottomless slumber. Darkness. Rain on the roof. I woke sometime before dawn, dimly aware of being soaked from the waist down. A cold stream of water leaking from the ceiling hit me directly on the shins and ankles. No matter how I twisted and turned, I was trapped under the leak, wedged in tight between other sleepers. I drew myself into a miserable ball and waited. The fate that had befallen these mariners touched us to the bottom of our hearts...

Just after first light, Valerii came into the hut. "Get your stuff," he said loudly, "Low tide, waves are down, we can get out." Pat, Baiba, and I scrambled into our wet clothes and ran out of the hut. A soaking, misty rain hung in the air. We decided to go out to the Blue Squid in shifts, and I wound up going first--"Like experiment," said Rustam--with Valerii. Within a few moments, we were out beyond the river bar in the motorboat, circling around and waiting for a bit of slack water. Valerii steered smoothly through the surf, which had gone down considerably, but nonetheless generated the occasional large wave. Finally, we made our move, straight out over a high curling breaker. We caught a little air, whumped into the water, and angled up over the next wave, dipping our portside almost to the water line, then shook free into the smooth water past the surf.

The sea had calmed to long, smooth rolling ridges, and we reached the Blue Squid without incident. While Valerii scooted in to pick up Pat, Baiba, and Rustam, I chatted with Lyova and Kolya. Kolya stared fixedly and unhappily at the waves. "How's it going?" I asked. "We've been stuck out here for two days already, hardly any water, no way to get to shore, neither one of us knows what the hell is happening here because there's no radio, that's how it's going," bitterly answered Lyova. His eyes spun deliriously around his prison, the boat. "What are we doing?" he asked. I told him I thought we were all going home. "Good," he said. "Hey, we drank all the peach brandy you left behind, hope you're not mad..."

Finally, the motorboat came back bearing Rustam, Pat, and Baiba. They transferred to the Blue Squid and we got busy packing our stuff. Rustam and Lyova cursed each other roundly as they fired up the Blue Squid and went to the fisherman's main boat, the *Aborigin*, which would take us all back to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky.

The swearing continued as we transferred to the *Aborigin*. Orange and compact, she rode the swells like a good horse in a canter. Valerii grabbed some canisters of oil from the Blue Squid and got busy monkeying around with the engine. There was a pile of crab taking up most of the small deck behind the house. Dead crab, lying in black oil and seawater, on its way to the Japanese delegation. The swearing seemed to be reaching a crescendo on the drunkenly rocking Blue Squid. Rustam and Lyova stood inches apart and waved their arms, roundly telling each other off while the abject Kolya stood motionless to one side. Valerii finished up, started the motor, and we turned seaward, waving goodbye. The wind kicked up again and rain pelted our deck.

We made Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky after four hours, chased by rain on rough seas. The *Aborigin* pushed steadily through the waves; Valerii gave us all a turn at the helm. Mist and fog hid the coast, but we could hear the surf booming on the headlands. Valerii scanned the waves ahead and gave us little course corrections--more to the right, more to the left--with his hands. It turned out he made the run back and forth between Zhirovaya Bay and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky two or three times a week. "I know all the rocks," he explained, "And out here, you'd better know all the rocks, or they get to know you."

The storm broke as we entered Avacha Bay. From a distance, flooded with sunshine, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky looked pretty good, even inviting, like a place where there would be warm, dry clothes. At the docks, Valerii and I gave each of us a prize Kamchatka crab. We began to feel a little better about life. He set off in the *Aborigin* for his regular moorage, smiling warmly and waving good-bye. We lugged our gear up the hill to the watch officer's shack and called our friends. While we waited for our ride to come, a sympathetic pensioner moonlighting as the dock watch gave us a cup of hot tea. "It's wet out here, you'll catch a cold," he clucked. "Nobody should be out in the rain. You'll all get the gripe and be sick for months."

Rustam called that evening to check up on us. He offered Pat and Baiba a refund, since he didn't take them into town on the Blue Squid, but they said, no, thanks, we got our money's worth, even a little more than ~~they~~<sup>we</sup> asked for.

Next year, I hope to try parasailing.

### **ON THE BAY'S FATHER**

Avachinsky Volcano--or simply *Avacha*--is one of Petropavlovsk- Kamchatsky's landmarks. An elegant, nearly perfect volcanic cone, Avacha forms part of the distinctive volcanic rampart northeast of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. The name *Avacha*, according to the explorer George Stellar, comes from the Itelmen tribe, and is a corruption of the word *Gshuabach*, which is a further derivative of the word *Kshchuapach--kshchu*, meaning bay, or gulf, and *apach*, meaning father. *Avacha*, the Bay's Father. Other variations appearing on early maps of the region include *Suachoo*, *Vovacha*, and *Vavacha*. Early explorers and mariner navigated their way into Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky by Avacha. In modern days, Avacha's profile appears on tinned fish produced by *Kamchatrybprom*, one of Kamchatka's fishing enterprises. Other volcanos in the *Avacha* group are, to the North, the dormant *Koryaksky* (elevation 3456 m), and the 'dead' volcanos *Aak* (elevation 2187 m) and *Arlik*(elevation 2319 m), and *Kozelsky* (elevation 2186 m) to the South.

The volcanos' names make for a pleasantly numbing mantra to chant while slogging up the slopes of this volcano. They help take your mind off the fact that to get to the top of *Avacha*, you must hike up interminable slopes of tiny, ball-bearing shaped rocks. Climbing *Avacha* isn't difficult. The mountain is only about 2700 meters tall, and even though you must climb this elevation starting from sea-level, just about anybody with strong legs and a few days to kill can do it.

The main interest in *Avacha* is that it is a very active volcano. The crater on top vents steam visible from downtown Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. *Avachais* a double volcano, like Mt. Vesuvius in Italy. It has two tiers, and at one time towered above its twin, the more rugged *Koryaksky*, by a few thousand meters. A massive explosion blew the former summit off *Avacha* long ago, scattering volcanic debris for well over 25 kilometers in all directions and leaving a crater 4 kilometers across in its wake. The crater gradually filled with a new cone of slag and rock, gradually building the *Avacha* we all know today. *Avacha* has an eruptive cycle of about 9 to 16 years. One recent eruption, on February 25, 1945, sent a 8-kilometer high plume of ash into the air, and shook Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky with earthquakes for days. *Avacha* last erupted in 1991, and sent a red tongue of lava licking halfway down its flanks. About once or twice a year, the city gets swept by rumors that Avacha is getting ready to erupt catastrophically and bury us, like the unfortunate residents of Pompeii, in various agonized poses for the benefit of future generations of archaeologists. Contemporary volcanologists estimate *Avacha's* magma chamber lies about 3-5 kilometers below the surface of the earth, has a temperature of about 1200 degrees Celsius, and a volume of over 10 cubic kilometers. <sup>4</sup>

I figured that I should at least climb this deadly but lovely volcano once before it erases Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky from the face of the earth. The normal route up *Avacha* leaves from the saddle between it and its higher twin, the more rugged *Koryaksky*. However, my guide Fedya and his friends thought it would be more fun to go up and look at the new lava tongue. So we drove to the outskirts of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, turned out onto a dirt road leading through the lunar landscape of volcanic debris, and left our car at the end of a track near a deserted artillery range ('Our Target Is Communism!' read one sign there), and hiked in a dry river bed to the snow line. We spent a night camped on *Avacha's* lower slopes. Up close, *Avacha* looks strangely alive, brooding down from a smoking brow of black rock, its slopes bloodied by brick-red rock thrown out from its throat. Before the last eruption, locals say ominous, evil-looking scarlet and orange clouds formed above crater.

One or two unfortunate people die on *Avacha* every year, mainly hikers who go up for the day, get caught in a storm, and perish from hypothermia. The volcano is deceptively simple, mainly due to unpredictable weather. Fedya, an accomplished alpinist who climbs regularly in the Tien Shan and Pamir Ranges in Central Asia, described to me with barely disguised pleasure the fate of some arrogant Moscow climbers who decided to "run up *Avacha* for a lark." "They got lost in the fog on the way down," he said, laughing at the memory as we sat around in camp, drinking tea. "Go this way," I said. 'No way,' said their leader, 'This is the way.' Half the group went with me and half went with him. Well, we got down in a few hours just fine, but they somehow blundered down into the woods on the other side of the volcano. The clouds settled in really thick and the weather stayed bad for about a week, and those clowns spent all that time going around and around in circles, no map, no compass, no food, terrorized by bears and tormented by mosquitoes, until the clouds lifted and they could get their bearings."

Our climb to the top of the Bay's Father took about five hours from our camp, with one long break for tea and cookies, and was an uneventful aerobic grind. *Avacha's* slopes are, to paraphrase Brezhnev-era ideologues, socialist in form, and communist in content--they stretch on and on, grey and boring, with no relief in sight, and it's always one step forward, two steps back. I passed this thought along to Fedya and he hurried ahead of me in disgust. A cloud sat on the upper 50 meters of the volcano and took away our view. The lava tongue may have been interesting when it was glowing red, but cooled off, it just looked like black rock. Things got more exciting when we neared the crater's rim and were engulfed by a noxious cloud of sulphureous steam. The steam burned my nose and throat; it smelled like my tenth-grade chemistry classroom after we all figured out how to make stink-bombs. My glasses fogged up, so I took them off, and staggering around, choking on sulphur fumes, I almost blundered over the edge into the crater.

Because of all the steam, it was hard to get a really good view into the crater, but the occasional gust tore enough of it away to reveal a shattered landscape of black rock choking in the volcano's throat. The crater dropped off about one hundred meters from the lip to the rock, which was then mounded in the middle to almost our level. Before the

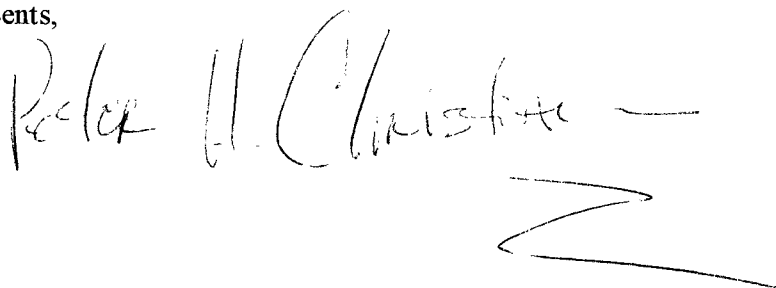
1991 eruption filled the crater, it was well over 300 meters deep. "Did you hear about the giant hole in Moscow, Fedya?" I asked. "No," he said. "The government is looking into it," I said. "Time to go down," he said.

Descending *Avacha* is much more enjoyable than climbing it; the proper technique is to run, jump, and boot-ski down slopes of ankle and shin-deep volcanic cinders. Our five-hour grind turned into a whooping, 40-minute run, grand compensation for the miseries of our climb. For added excitement, there are actually some crevasses in the tiny glacier in the saddle from the side we went up, so we got to leap dramatically over the four-foot wide 'abyss'.

In the winter, Fedya told me, he and his friends like to ski up *Avacha*; they leave Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky on a cross-country ski trail that goes from the city's outskirts to treeline, and then run up the volcano with their downhill skis and get a single breathtaking run down for all that effort. Last year, he said, a French alpinist came to Kamchatka to make a film about skiing volcanoes, and hired Fedya as his guide. "I rode up in a helicopter," he said, smiling with pleasure at the thought. "Later on my friends saw the film and said I was getting spoiled. I said, if that's getting spoiled, boys, then you can ruin me."

Best wishes for easy descents,

Peter H. Christiansen



#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Kamchatsky Bereg*, Martinenko, Valeri, Dal'novostochnoye Knizhnoye Izdatel'stvo, Kamchatskoye Otdeleniye, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, 1991. pp. 34-35. This wonderful book contains a wealth of information on Kamchatka's maritime history. It is not yet available in translation.

<sup>2</sup> *Kamchatrybvod*, the Kamchatka Region Fish and Game Inspectorate, conducts fisheries and environmental analysis for the region.

<sup>3</sup> *Vi* in Russian is the formal form of the pronoun 'you', and is respectful and deferential. *Ti* is the familiar.

<sup>4</sup> *Po Kamchatke*, Dal'nevostochnoye Knizhnoye Izdatel'stvo, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, 1965.