



# RUSSIA'S WILD EAST

PHOTOGRAPHY BY IGOR SHPILENOK

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# HIATKA



# The acrid odor of sulfur filled the air as steam boiled from geysers surrounding me on all sides.....

I knew he was out there, but where? I had caught a glimpse of his massive form just before the wind shifted and shrouded him behind a curtain of fog. I felt certain he had not left, that he was still watching me as I searched for him. Hissing steam erupting from vents masked any sounds I might have gathered about his movements. He was there, perhaps only a few meters away. I waited, watched and wondered. Moments later the cold, moist wind shifted again, the fog stirred, my heart raced as the magnificent bear emerged before me. Instinctively I shot, exposing frame after frame of the mighty bruin.

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Kamchatka is like a time machine. When I arrived in the vast, unscathed wilderness three years ago I felt as though I had traveled back 300 years. Wilderness still dominates the peninsula today as it did then. I was first drawn here by my desire to photograph the volcanoes, geysers, and brown bears during a three-week expedition, but three years since, this magical place still has not released its grip on me.

Kamchatka sits between the Sea of Okhotsk and the Pacific Ocean, on Russia's easternmost border. Here, fiery volcanoes reach skyward, then slide down to dip their feet in the cold seas. Kamchatka's volcanoes not only create spectacular scenery, but they form unique mineral-rich ecosystems. Nutrient-laden streams support six species of spawning salmon. Kamchatka is the birthplace of one quarter of all wild salmon in the Pacific. Here one can observe massive salmon runs in pristine watersheds still intact from ocean to stream, or watch the Kamchatka brown bear—one of the largest in the world—as it fishes unabashed for salmon. Kamchatka's Pacific coast teems with

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seabirds and marine mammals—cormorants, gulls, kittiwakes, sea otters, seals, and whales. Majestic Steller’s sea eagles and white-tailed sea eagles soar overhead. Endemic snow sheep nimbly maneuver steep mountain cliffs, while giant wild reindeer graze the wide-open tundra beneath colossal volcanoes.

Preserved primarily because of its remoteness from Russia’s industrial centers Kamchatka has remained isolated. Extending 1,200 km from its northern border with Chukotka to its southern tip, its land area is greater than that of Germany, Austria, and Belgium combined. Technically a peninsula, Kamchatka is akin to an island in its isolation, as no roads or railroads link the peninsula to the mainland. The internal road network is poorly developed, a factor, which has also helped keep developers out of the wilderness. Most travel on Kamchatka is done by helicopter, and the high cost of fuel limits even that form of transportation.

On Kamchatka, I retreated to the remote and strictly protected Kronotsky Nature Reserve, one of Russia’s 101 wilderness areas in a system of “zapovedniks” first established 90 years ago. Like the first preserve Barguzinsky, created in 1916 on the shores of Lake Baikal to protect the Barguzin sable, Kronotsky was founded in 1934 to safeguard declin-

ing populations of Kamchatka’s valuable fur-bearing sable. Located amidst the wilds of Kamchatka, Kronotsky is akin to a Russian nesting doll—a wilderness area inside a wilderness area.

My home—a small one-room ranger cabin in the heart of the preserve —was surrounded by the majesty of volcanoes, by forests that never felt an axe, by dramatic landscapes unscarred by power lines and roads. Wild animals I came across often had yet to learn that man was the Czar of the taiga, and refused to yield their age-old trails. Rivers were sometimes so thick with spawning salmon that there was nowhere left to swim. Here I felt fully immersed in nature, as it must have appeared to primeval man. This is a part of our past that we all pine for. Humans have yet to destroy much of Kamchatka’s wild nature.

Kronotsky Nature Reserve is more than a million hectares of remote wilderness. Nine of Kamchatka’s 29 active volcanoes puncture its crust. The Geyser River, with its famous Valley of the Geysers and hundreds of hot springs, runs through its midst. A vast volcanic plateau rises across the land, making some places so inaccessible that people haven’t set foot there for years. Vast glaciers nestle in mountain depressions and high waterfalls tumble into deep valleys. The enormous Kronotskoye Lake in the re-

serve’s center covers 242 square kilometers, the largest freshwater lake on Kamchatka. Kronotsky Nature Reserve is fronted by 250 kilometers of Pacific coast, with precipitous cliffs and empty beaches of black volcanic sand in the Kronotsky Bay. Whales spray fountains above the ocean waves, while Steller’s sea lions and sea otters lounge on ice floes and rocks along the coast. Kronotsky Nature Reserve safeguards hundreds of bears, giant nests of Steller’s sea eagles, and thousands of salmon in pristine rivers.

There are only five places on earth with large areas of geothermal activity, coming to the surface in the form of geysers. These are in Iceland, the North Island of New Zealand, Yellowstone National Park in the United States, El Tatio in Chile, and the Valley of the Geysers in Kamchatka. Tatiana Ustinova, a scientist at Kronotsky Nature Reserve, discovered Valley of the Geysers, nestled in the narrow canyon of the Geyser River, in 1941. She and her guide Anisifor Krupenin were likely the first humans to ever set foot on the bank of the Geyser River making one of the last great geographical discoveries of our planet.

Seven years prior to its discovery, the Valley of the Geysers fell under protection when Kronotsky Nature Reserve was created. The Valley is a deep canyon, which cuts for about 10 kilometers through the slopes of the Kikhpinych Vol-

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cano. The active part of the Valley is condensed in a six-kilometer stretch in the lower reaches of the Geyser River. Here, all known forms of hydrothermal phenomena are found: geysers, boiling permanent and pulsating hot springs, small mud volcanoes, mud pots, thermal lakes, fumaroles, and more. There were 41 significantly active geysers in the Valley before the mudslide of June 3, 2007 buried or flooded about half of them, including the first one discovered by Ustinova. Witnessing the transformation in the days following the mudslide, as a thermal lake formed where a mountain river once ran, I realized that the Valley with its remaining geysers became no less beautiful and remarkable.

This rumba of geysers and fountains is accompanied by over 200 spouting, steaming and boiling thermal springs, vapor-steam jets, boiling mud-pots, echoing cavities, hot and warm lakes, and creeks with beautiful waterfalls. Geysers and boiling hot springs emit water full of dissolved minerals. The resulting geyserites—siliceous combinations of oxides and salts of varying color—form terraces, domes, and platforms around the outlets. Many of the geysers were

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named for the color and texture of the geyserites around them, such as Zhemchuzhny (Pearl), Sakharny (Sugar), and Malachite Grotto. The Valley is unbelievably bright and colorful. Some people, who have never been there, upon seeing my photographs, accuse me of using Photoshop to tweak the colors. But in reality, the multi-colored geyserites, volcanic clays, and bright green heat-loving alga and microorganisms rimming the hot waterfalls and springs form the wide-color palette of the Valley.

In the warm oasis of the Valley of the Geysers, spring arrives much earlier than on the surrounding volcanic plateau where snow lingers until the end of June. Brown bears, upon emerging from their dens, congregate here to feed on young spring grasses. Birds, when spring is slow to arrive, feed on the abundance of insects on the thermal

fields. Wagtails even construct their nests on the warm earth, which acts as a natural incubator. Chicks grow more quickly in the warm nest and begin to fly earlier, increasing their chance of survival.

In May and June, the surrounding mountains are still covered with snow. Only on the slopes of the canyon of the Geyser River, warmed by underground thermal processes, does an oasis of green grass grow, attracting dozens of bears. It is also when the bears carry out their annual mating rituals. Overwhelmed by hormones, the bears, which don't particularly fear humans in the nature reserve anyway, throw caution to the wind, thus I had to remain wary.

The Valley of the Geysers is a crossroads of bear trails, leading from denning areas to feeding grounds of berries and pine nuts and onto the fish-filled rivers near the ocean.







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In addition to the permanent residents of the Valley of the Geysers, transient bears often pass through. Some of them, having traveled from areas outside of the reserve, would panic at the sight of humans, while others allowed people to observe them at a close distance, having spent their lives in the safety of the reserve where they never had negative encounters with people. Bears quickly learned where it was safe to pass over a thermal field without getting burned.

Kamchatka boasts the largest brown bears in Eurasia, and the second largest in the world, after the grizzlies on Kodiak Island in Alaska. It also has some of the most fortunate bears in the world, not because of the extent of wilderness, but because of the abundance of food. This region is unique in that it boasts all three main types of foods that bear require to fatten up for the winter: berries, pine nuts, and salmon. Six species of salmon alternate spawning periods and fill the rivers in turn from June through the winter to February. For comparison, bears in Siberia put on weight before hibernating feeding primarily on pine nuts and berries. Bears in Alaska feed mostly on salmon and berries. Kamchatka bears have access to all three, plus have the added benefit of food scavenged along the seashore—seaweed, fish, mollusks, birds, and marine mammals, including beached whales.

Despite its expanses of wilderness, growing threats of poaching, over fishing, gold and platinum mining, and oil and gas exploration on the continental shelf could lead to the rapid demise of Russia's final frontier. Poaching is probably the greatest threat to Kamchatka today, undermining its most valuable resource—salmon. Salmon is a keystone species on Kamchatka—take it away and the entire ecosystem will collapse. Bears, eagles, seals, gulls, and people all depend on salmon. Salmon is Kamchatka's greatest renewable resource, which can provide income and food for generations. In the past decade, illegal fishing has proliferated under corrupt enforcement agencies and government institutions. In the ocean, fishing companies take two to three times more than the legal catch, decimating reproductive capacity of adult populations.

Yet we still have an opportunity on Kamchatka to conserve some of the last true wilderness areas on our planet. About 15 percent of the peninsula is preserved in protected areas. True wilderness is not something that can be regenerated or replanted. Kamchatka is unlike any other place on the planet, a stronghold for biodiversity, an open-air laboratory for studying volcanic activity and the formation of Earth. It is my hope that my photographs of this majestic and magical place will not someday be part of an historical archive demonstrating Kamchatka “before and after,” but instead will urge people to act now to preserve Kamchatka's wild lands for generations to come. Wild animals I came across often had yet to learn that man was the Czar of the taiga, and refused to yield their age-old trails. Rivers were sometimes so thick with spawning salmon that there was nowhere left to swim. Here I felt fully immersed in nature as it must have appeared to primeval man. This is a part of our past that we all pine for. Humans have yet to destroy much of Kamchatka's wild nature.

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