

Getting Away from it all in Kamchatka – July 2019

By Fiona Turner



Group shot with leader Andrey Golovachev kneeling - Cedric Christie

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“You’re going where?” This was the response from all but two of my friends when they heard the location of my proposed summer holiday. One had heard of it via a National Geographic programme on Steller’s sea eagles and the other from a misspent youth playing too many games of “Risk”. In truth I hadn’t heard of Kamchatka either when I read the small ad advertising a 2 week trek in the Spring edition of the AAC(UK) newsletter.

Some 8 weeks after signing up I had booked my flights, acquired a Russian visa and was ready to depart. To reach this exceedingly remote Russian outpost I first flew to Moscow and then continued to fly east for another 8 hours until I hit the Bering Strait. Here was the Kamchatka Peninsula, a vast area that is almost entirely pristine wilderness. It is an area formerly closed to most Russians and also foreigners but is now becoming famous for volcanoes, brown bears and mosquitoes. During our 2 week holiday we experienced all three, in abundance! There are few roads, few paths, few people and no shops or cafés on our trek. In the skies there are no vapour trails and there is no mobile phone signal. There are a couple of huts mostly used by volcanologists or other scientists and the whole area feels remote and unexplored.

Arriving at the airport city of Yelizovo on the outskirts of the area’s capital, Petropavlovsky-Kamchatsky, I met up with our Russian guide Andrey and the other team members. There were

Margaret, Peter and Pete from South Africa, Ray from Australia, Cedric from the UK and Sharon, also British but currently working in Japan. In addition there was Natasha and 3 delightful young Russian men, Dmitri, Sergei and Ilia hired as porters by the 3 wise South Africans.

A long drive north took us first to the village of Kozyrevsk where we sorted out our trekking gear before an ATV transfer the following day up through the birch forest and over amazing lava fields to the bleak Tolbachik base camp. Our proposed trek would take us in a rough 100km horseshoe around the 3672m Tolbachik volcano which had last erupted significantly in 1975/76 with some smaller eruptions in 2012. The weather was distinctly British at this stage: cold, misty and rainy. However, the entertaining antics of the ground squirrels and the occasional glimpse of a snowy volcano kept our spirits up. The first day we spent exploring local lava fields and lava caves. The next day we set off on a long day ascent to the 3000m snow covered summit of Plosky Tolbachik volcano. Sadly no views but at least we had a summit! On the next day we were ready to depart on our trek. With heavy rucksacks (how I envied the wise South Africans) we finally set off, our route taking us over the Tolud col to the western flanks of the Zimina volcano. Thankfully the weather was improving and the bleak lava fields were being replaced by vegetation. Increasingly spectacular scenery and the abundant flowers kept the botanists and photographers amongst us interested. The chance of spotting a bear also ensured we kept our eyes peeled and maintained a general frisson of excitement.

On day 3 of the trek large paw prints were spotted in some mud and then in the snow on a frozen lake we were crossing. Soon the bear itself was seen and excitement mounted as we carefully got nearer, cameras clicking away. Eventually, tiring of being our centre of attention, the bear went for a dip in the lake leaving us to walk the final few km to that night's campsite full of excitement after our close encounter.

At this campsite in the foothills of the Bezymianny volcano we were due a rest day with an optional ascent of the ash and scree covered 2600m volcano itself. Without our heavy rucksacks we all felt we could float up to the summit crater and the descent back down again was both fast and fun. The crater itself was a bit of a disappointment. I think we were all hoping for bubbling lava and some spewing ash, but at least we got some great views of the spectacular smoking Kluchevskya Sopka which, at 4850m, is the highest active volcano in Eurasia.



Campsite beneath the Bezymianny volcano - Fiona Turner



Classic view of Kamchatka - Andrey Golovachev

The following day was due to be a long one with a crossing of the infamous Studenya River. Rucksacks still felt heavy (we obviously weren't eating our rations fast enough) but the scenery was diverting and the weather great. The river crossing was thankfully negotiated without mishap and we finally arrived at our last campsite. It was a perfect spot located just above a river gorge with edelweiss in the meadows. Sadly the mosquitoes also decided it was a perfect spot and happily feasted on any exposed skin. Yet again trying to eat dinner through a mozzie headnet was quite a trial but it was amusing to watch the various techniques being used by everyone.



Dinner Time! - Cedric Christie

The next morning we had a leisurely start as we walked out to meet our ATV vehicle. While having a brief lunch stop we had our closest encounter with a bear which came sufficiently close to us to ensure we rapidly replaced our boots and stood up as a group to make ourselves appear as large as possible. Andrey had bear flares handy but thankfully these were not required. Photos and videos taken, we moved on to the trailhead with massive grins on our faces. What a climax to the holiday!