Kamchatka Expedition

“The scenery looks like a film set. Random rocks poking out of rolling green hills, and a few peaks peaking out of the distance. There’s river beds and valleys too. It’s chilly when we stop. The evening back at camp is beautiful – the clouds lift and we can see peaks in three directions and the valley and its sticking out rocks laid out below us. Cloud comes and goes over the peaks. We see smoke from one of the volcanoes. Dominic shouts out – he’s spotted lava – the smoking peak is red.”

Kamchatka is said to be the wildest, but at the same time, the most beautiful place there is. To come to the point first: we were not disappointed. Approximately four months before the trip to Kamchatka the final constellation of our group was fixed: Me and Nathalie Vonrüti who did an exchange semester in Cambridge and came up with the idea of the trip to Kamchatka, Dominic Funk a friend of mine from Switzerland, and Jenifer Mizen, who works at the university and who Nathalie and I met at the annual dinner of the Expedition Society. This report will be a mixture of organizational details that seem to be important to us and quotes from Jenny’s diary in order to give a better impression of our trip. Pictures and quotes are all from our longest trek – a nine-day hike around the Tolbachik volcano, where we had to carry all the food and equipment by ourselves.

Our aim as a group was to show that individual travelling in this part of Russia is both possible and very rewarding. In contrast to a documentary, which shows the beauty of the area but makes it appear to be off limits at the same time, we wanted to enable others to follow our footsteps. In discussions, internet forums and soon on our homepage we are now sharing our GPS datasets, preparation forms as well as our travel itinerary with others. In doing so we hope to inspire more young people to explore this remote region of immense natural beauty to increase its protection through awareness. During the four weeks, we only met seven people (split up into three groups) unaccompanied by a guide. All of them could speak Russian. There is definitely a need to encourage people to go to such remote places on their own even though it seems to be impossible at a first glance.

“Rounding a cover, we reach a flat part. Icy streams criss-cross it. Everything goes black and white and grey foggy. Nearly at the top! Around another corner and up, we get more hopes of some sun. It’s definitely above the fog somewhere! The path gets steeper. We see blue sky ahead! Suddenly it levels out a little and we see the peak and the valley to our side, half full of cloud. The further up we go the more the cloud lifts. The path becomes steeper, and I regret my fast walking earlier.

Walking UP. Top! Crater. Red striped bands of rock. The ridge climbs along to the right. Rumbles and rockfall noise.

Behind us are three more volcanoes in the blue distance.”

Among all the challenges, bear safety was our largest concern as Kamchatka has the highest bear density in the world and the Kamchatka bear is the second biggest brown bear after the Kodiak bear. While planning our expedition, I put together a safety assessment focusing both on prevention and our ability to react to a bear encounter. Generally, I am extremely pleased how well we managed to adhere to our own rules. Experiencing the first bear walking past our campsite on the second day greatly corroborated our determination to keep up our rigorous bear safety programme. During our nine-day trip, we saw six bears in total: four adults and two cubs. Two encounters were close to our tents, the closest approximately 50 m. While the bears never came closer when they got aware of us they didn’t seem to be scared of us at all. They often watched us for a certain time until they continued on their path. For that reason, we always split up tasks like making camp, storing food or going to the toilet into groups of two so that nobody was unaccompanied at any time. To be four people was definitely a wise decision.
“The bear near our camp is a whopper. It’s hard to tell when he’s close, but we watch him and a matter of minutes after he starts to move, he’s crossed a large river valley with ease and is up on the next ridge and few km away. He’s outlined briefly against the sky at the top of the ridge, and I start to really get an idea of how big he is!”

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We continue towards the thin line of blue sky on the horizon. The land gradually gets shrubbier. Quite a way further on, we see three bears – a mother and two cubs. The ground here looks flattish, but has many ups and downs across what looks like river valleys. The bear appears suddenly above a river bed – scary that the cubs are there. We shake the bear bells and sing the Eskimo song. We take photos, and try to decide where to go and go for staying at the same place and keeping an eye on them. We watch them for maybe 5 minutes, then head in the opposite direction.”

This expedition has really expanded our view of the world. Prior to the trip, we had all heard various ideas about what the people we would meet might be like, some of which we found to be very stereotyped and incorrect! With our combined Russian vocabulary encompassing less than fifty words (including five brands of Vodka), we were successful to buy basic items such as food or bus tickets independently, but in some areas, for example in organizing transport in the outlands, we were very dependent upon the people we met on the way. Luckily, they were absolutely fantastic. We were invited to campfires, cooked for, introduced to old Russian folk songs, offered to hitch a ride and so on. The people we will remember best are Igor and Anastasia, the couple we contacted through the couch surfing website. They were incredibly warm-hearted, selfless and great fun. They accompanied us to the city and in twenty minutes achieved what we couldn’t have in an entire day: we received the permits to enter the Klyuchi national park as a self-guided tour and to top it all also four bear sprays and other bear deterrents.

“We finally hit the point where we walk on the lava. It’s smoother here, and more road-like. There’s white marks drawn on it sporadically on the black/grey – looking like road center markings on asphalt. Our GPS ways go the opposite direction. I look in that direction. There’s some heat haze, and a couple of small secretions of steam. Dominic goes over the lava to investigate. I go around the edge. It’s still very warm in small patches, with heat still coming up from cracks beneath the surface. The eruption was three years ago. (More recent than our maps).”

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Sincerely,

Cyril Statzer
Leader of the Kamchatka Expedition on behalf of the expedition team.