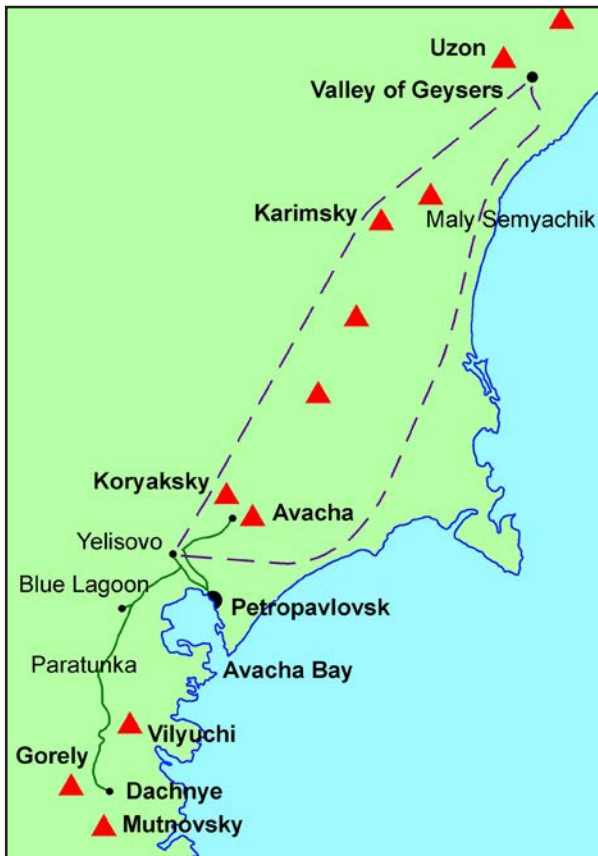


Asian journey, via Kamchatka

Diary of a journey in 1998 across Alaska, Kamchatka and Siberia

Near the end of a great geological tour of Jordan and Syria, I asked Gilia Slocock, a delightful and well-travelled lady from Oxford, where she wanted to go to next. 'Kamchatka', she said, and I rose to the challenge.

The remote Siberian peninsula of Kamchatka had been a military zone closed even to Soviet citizens until 1989, and to foreigners for a few years later still. It became an almost mythical travel destination, and also has some splendid and active volcanoes. Very few people had visited. I chased around travel agents in England and Alaska; none had actually been there, but they had some contacts that could prove to be useful. So in the summer of 1998, Jan and I went there with the intention of setting up a group tour in 1999, combining it with some locations in Alaska different from those visited on the previous Alaska tours.



I had a previous geological tour with three weeks in the Canyonlands of Utah and Arizona, so we met up in Anchorage, and did the recce of Alaska on our own. We were then joined by son Sam, and new daughter-in-law Jen, to fly over to Kamchatka. I had already selected the volcanoes to visit, and our guide for the recce was Nikolay Kruglyakov.

As a result of all this, the tour in 1999 (to both Alaska and Kamchatka) was voted a best-ever geological tour by its 35 participants. It was also the first large group that Nikolay had handled, and he then went on to establish and lead Kamchatka Lost World Tours, which has become the largest and most successful travel company on the peninsula; and it still runs copies of our eight-day geological tour every year.

Saturday August 15, flights

Jan arrives first into Anchorage on flights from home via Schipol and Seattle; in at 5pm so she picks up the car from Affordable, and drives to the pre-arranged Super 8 Motel. Then I fly in from Salt Lake City, taking the scenic route via Denver and Seattle, and we meet up as planned at 11pm in the motel.



Sunday August 16, Anchorage

Call at Reeve Aleutian re the flights to Kamchatka. Then call on Circumpolar, who are the fall-back contact (with Kamchatintour in Petropavlosk) if Lena and Friends (who are the link from Wildlife Travel in London) do not work out, though we are with them for the recce trip; helpful, though they later make difficulties through their links with Reeve, and yet again all their smooth talk is second-hand because they have never been across to Kamchatka.

Leave Anchorage at midday in steady rain. Clears up a bit by Matanuska, and we walk through forest for 30 minutes to check the Tolsona mud volcano; just two bubbling pools in a sea of mud that has footprints of moose, caribou and foxes. Overnight at Glenallen.

Monday August 17, Denali Highway

Leave at 8.00, northwards to Paxson, following the oil pipeline elevated in order to preserve the permafrost, and then onto the Denali Highway, which is new to us. The inn at Tangle Lakes will be a great spot to stay next year. An abundance of glacial and meltwater features all around and further west, and an old lake bed with beautiful stone polygons that are in sunshine. Check out all the hotels in Denali village, but do not go into the park as we have been before. Check out the Suntrana valleys for coal exposures in old mines, then stay in the Dome b&b.

Tuesday August 18, Fairbanks

Breakfast in the Dome, then out to Usibelli coal strip mine, which can be fixed for a group visit. Pass a beaver sitting on top of his lodge in a roadside lake. Drive north on featureless road to Nenana, and over low hills to Fairbanks. Arrive at Fox Tunnel at 1pm, and shown around; site is a military experimental tunnel driven in the permafrost; excellent ice wedges and lenses, so will make a good visit. Nearby gold dredge has good displays, but is expensive and not for the group, many of whom will have seen better on the Klondike. Fairbanks is not an exciting town.

Wednesday August 19, Yukon valley

Leave at 8.00 for a long day driving north on the Dalton Highway, which was built as the haul road for construction of the Alaska Oil Pipeline; it has only been open as a public road since major legal disputes wrested it from the oil companies' control. Clear morning, then cloud in the afternoon, after weeks of cloud and rain. Road is excellent, but windscreen cracks after 100 miles,



Superb stone polygons in frozen sediments west of Tangle Lakes.



The elevated oil pipeline with cooling fins on the piles to ensure conservation of the permafrost.



Highway through Alaskan forest.

and see a beautiful pine marten on the rocks beside a turnout. Forest gives way to taiga and then to tundra; see lots of permafrost features, but no ice. Classic scenes along the pipeline with its various features to preserve the permafrost, and some good bits of geology. Walk round the short nature trail at the granite top of Finger Mountain, and pause bemused at hill named Gobbler's Knob; raised pipeline has higher sections so caribou can pass beneath.

Weird people at the Yukon Bridge cafe, but then really helpful at Coldfoot. Stop for the night in unitized Slate Creek motel, and have an excellent OTT buffet dinner at the Lodge, notable for truckers of the low-slung jeans variety consuming enormous meals. Mountains have snow on their peaks. The place is noted for its climate: in 1989 it recorded both 82° below and 97° above.



The oil pipeline across the North Slope, so cold that cooling of piles into the permafrost is not needed.

Thursday August 20, Brooks Range northbound

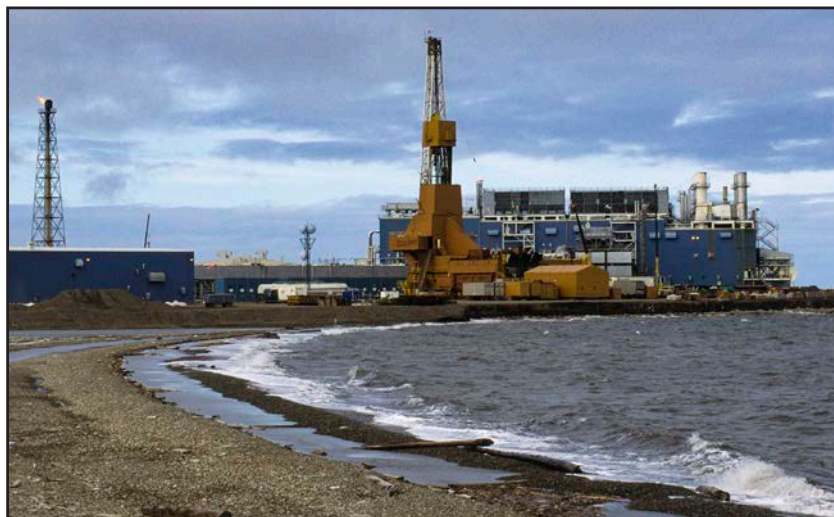
Rainy morning for an impressive drive over the mountains; apparently the 'summer' has been the worst for twenty years. Small town of Wiseman is not yet awake. The most northerly tree along the pipeline has a big notice board saying 'do not cut', and the tundra beyond is ever more beautiful. Big cave entrances in one limestone hill. Rain and snow over the Atigun Pass at 4740 feet high, and a very muddy road, so the car is plastered. Superb, photogenic rock glaciers just above the road, and 20 Dall sheep on a nearby cliff.

Out of the mountains in better weather, and the North Slope is impressive in its vastness; beautiful open grassland crossed by the pipeline that has no cooling fins on the piles because it is always so cold. Herd of 32 musk-oxen grazing on the floodplain of the Sagavanirktok River. Jan spots an ice-mound collapse, and we find the remains of an ice core within partially frozen peat, beside an excellent network of ice wedge features. It will be a good stop next year. Good thaw lakes beside the road, with undercuts in the peat.

Deadhorse is the 'town' just inland from Prudhoe Bay, and is just one vast construction site. A central lake has marginal polygons of ice wedge features, and huge gravel pads for all buildings. Caribou Hotel is a series of portacabins, but good, few rooms occupied so dinner is an excellent buffet (featuring 'soup of the Day' and also 'Beans of the Day') at the Prudhoe Bay Hotel. Drive around 'town'; well casing firms, bentonite mixers, barites suppliers, wire-liners, Vibroseis, drill platforms, skidoo hotel trains. Follow a large brown bear climbing in and out of large dumpsters (comes down backwards!), before he goes off to sleep under a building raised on piles to conserve the permafrost. No real night at the end of a beautiful evening.

Friday August 21, Prudhoe Bay

Only a few hours of twilight, so no aurora; still some cloud, which is normal in summer. See hotel manager to confirm group booking for next year. Guide from BP collects us at 8.30 for an all-day tour of the oilfields. Very good except that he talks too much and has little sense of timing [but it is much better organised for the group



Oil infrastructure on Endicott Island.

One of the town bears in Deadhorse.





Musk ox on the North Slope.

Bearberry colours the tundra on the Atigun Pass over the Brooks Range.

in the next year]. Impressive scale of operations and conditions for the cold. Heavy environmental control; e.g. diesel used in well photography can be injected into a disposal well, but diesel from a truck cannot. Excellent polygons, some small pingoes, and many grazing caribou. Well heads on Endicott Island are good, and the machinery for fluid separation is amazing.

BP lunch out on site, and back to hotel at 5pm. See Princess buses come in plastered with mud so that windows are all opaque; reminder to wash them at intervals next year. Brilliant store, with everything, including blow-up sheep. Excellent caribou stew for dinner, then drive-about to check the key sites. The wind gets colder.

Saturday August 22, Brooks Range southbound

Murky morning for drive south, which we have to do, though the group tour next year will fly back to Anchorage while the bus returns empty. Rain for a bit, then it clears beautifully for the Atigun Pass. Three groups of musk-oxen, totalling 47 (counted for the Yukon Bridge logbook) so some photos, and Dall sheep on the pass. Deep mud only just passable on the Chandalar Shelf; OK for trucks but not for saloon cars. Lovely short walk across the tundra to a viewpoint over a river capture; huge mushrooms, blueberries galore, lovely soft mosses, some *cladonia* reindeer moss, red bearberry leaves, dusting of snow on the road and plenty on the mountains.

Wait 20 minutes while a new conduit drain is placed in trench across the road. Then a lovely drive down to Coldfoot. Stop for photos of drainage engineering, and a car stops thinking that we have seen animals. Huge buffet of top sirloin at the Lodge again. Girl at visitor desk lives in Wiseman, where the population of twelve is mostly her family; her husband traps in winter and works for National Parks in summer; her bother traps and fishes, and his wife makes jewellery.

Sunday August 23, Yukon valley southbound

Aurora is good at 1.15am, but only lasts for about five minutes. Cold night, and a thick frost in a clear cold morning, with steam rising off the lakes. Eat a load of blueberries picked from the tundra, and see one arctic hare and an elk running across the road. Easy drive south, and Yukon River cafe is still totally charmless. Mid-afternoon into Fairbanks, so visit good museum, and then have a double dose in the jet wash to make the car presentable. Super 8 hotel and Bella Pizza are both good.

Monday August 24, Delta Junction

Late morning, then drive through North Pole, commuter town for Fairbanks with everything themed on Santa Claus, including a Santa Senior Centre. Through forest all the way to Delta except for one fine view across the Tanana to the Alaska Range. Town of Delta is growing, and we walk to the river bank for memory's sake; another amazing display of mushrooms. Weather declines over the pass to drizzle at Glenallen. Copper Centre Lodge is old style, not full, but booked up all other nights. Excellent dinner, then walk to a gravel quarry.

Tuesday August 25, Chitina

Yet another dull morning in this unusually poor summer. Fast drive to Chitina; funny place with brilliant cluster of vintage cars rusting under weeds. Dirt road along old railway track, and over high steel viaduct

beside crumbling timber version. At end of road, footbridge has recently replaced the old self-hauled tram car on a cable; then a bus into McCarthy with an awful woman driver, and stay at Lodge. The derelict 14-storey wooden building that housed the mineral processing plant of the old Kennecott copper mine is very spectacular except for the abundance of aggressive 'No Trespassing' signs. Out onto the glacier for an excellent walk over the huge moraines. Then family-style dinner and a lazy evening while it rains.

Wednesday August 26, Kennecott

Breakfast in a cloudy morning, with some drizzle. Walk up the track to the Bonanza Mine, four miles and 4000 feet above. An hour through alder and willow scrub, then views of splendid rock glacier on Porphyry Peak and of moraines on the Kennecott Glacier. Limestone ridge is castellated above greenstone with ore on the contact. Last thousand feet of altitude is in snow, and old mine buildings are dramatic. Mine adit blocked by layered outflow ice just a few yards inside. Lots of ore mineral about; heavy chalcocite and coloured secondaries.

Climb to ridge for view of glacier past limestone wall with lots of blue and green minerals (the orebody was found when a pony train in the valley headed up to the green patch that they thought was grass). Snow shower on the way down, and our knees suffer. Back to Lodge after eight hours. Good turkey dinner and then short walkabout in 'town'; two black bears out on the glacier moraines, but no sun.

Thursday August 27, through Glenallen

Some blue sky and high cloud for better views of mountains. Dreadful lodge staff brag about red aurora during the night. Then have wait until 8am for the first shuttle back to the bridge. Easy along the dirt road, but weather declining, except for a few brief views of the Wrangell Mountains. Stop at the active landslide for new photos, then drinks in Glenallen.

Good views south to Tazlina and Nabzina glaciers, and Chigach Mountains clear for part of the time. No access to the Matanuska Glacier because now on a private site charging \$6. Great storms on the way into Anchorage. Trawl the hotels for most of the evening, and the Anchorage Hotel could be good.

Friday August 28, Cordova

Up for 6.30 shuttle to the airport. Only 15 people on the 37-seat Dash plane to Cordova. Good views at first of Redoubt and Denali both shining clear, but then cloud over the Chugach. Rent a rather old car at the airport. Drive out to Childs Glacier, superb calving into the river, and we have it to ourselves. The adjacent 'Million Dollar Bridge' (it went way over budget when built for the railway) is also good with its span that dropped off during the 1964 earthquake,



Remains of the copper mines high above Kennecott.



Moraine draped over ice and some scarily large, meltwater cavities within the wasting zone of the Kennecott Glacier.

Below: Million Dollar Bridge after the 1964 earthquake.





Childs Glacier and Copper River.

and a cheapo rebuild for cars only. The delta of the Copper River is huge, and the Miles Glacier is soon lost into rain, which then does not stop all day. Beautiful moss forest along the Saddlebag Trail, provides a good walk, even in the rain.

Cordova is a laid-back town. We meet up with Becky of Northwestern Bus, who is enthusiastic but efficient, and will provide a bus and mini-lunch for the group visit. Also fix for a fleet of float planes to take the group to Valdez, but this year we have a scheduled flight back to Anchorage. Sam and Jen are waiting for us at the airport, having had a wonderful, cloudless, excursion flight over Denali. Harry's for dinner and a late night after much talking.

Saturday Sunday August 29 30, Bering Sea

Lazy morning in Anchorage. Check out more hotels, return the rental car, and out to the airport on a warm sunny day, probably the best since we arrived in Alaska. Reeve flight has only 22 passengers in a 40-seat section of a 727-combi (so half freight). Cross date-line, then refuel at Anadyr (a remote military outpost with nearby gold mines), where armed guard prevents anyone from leaving the plane. Tundra to south clear and sunny, but only the top 20 metres of Koryaksky out of a sea of cloud at Petropavlovsk. Then passport checks and Customs are both very slow.

Met by two young lads from Lena, with two cars. Ours is an English teacher who cannot work in a school because there he does not get paid (this was the time of the massive collapse of the entire Russian economy). Along 'motorway' into town; van just in front of Sam and Jen's car loses a wheel in a shower of sparks. Into Avacha Hotel; very basic, small room, tiny square stone bath with an exciting wooden plug rising 10 cm high dead centre; good bed and warm. Buy beers, Coke and bits of food from street stalls, better than hotel bar cafe, but had large meal on plane. Walk to diesel-fume beach and 'centre' of town beyond a lake. Blocks of flats are endless, and communist squalor is everywhere. Good night's sleep, but only after taking phone off the hook to avoid the exploratory calls from 'ladies of the night'.

Monday August 31, Petropavlovsk

Great breakfast; entire menu is 'off', but chicken, salad and yoghurt are excellent. Foul weather still, and we all set off to Avacha in a wonderful, all-terrain, 6WD truck/bus; Nikolay (chief and guide), Irena (his wife, also a mountain guide, but as camp cook this time), Costa (interpreter), Sasha (driver), us four, and Bengt (a mad old



Residential areas of Petropavlovsk in front of its two great volcanoes, Koryaksky on the left, and Avacha on the right.

Dane who is the rest of our 'tour group'). Drive in cloud up long dry river channel that doubles as a road, to a hut camp that is sometimes a ski centre and is in state of multiple disrepair, with a lone camp-master stuck there for the summer with ravens, marmots and one Siberian husky. Adjacent volcanology hut now abandoned after failing to predict eruption in 1991 until somebody telephoned them from town to tell them that lava was flowing down the far side.

Huge excellent lunch, and we stop in the huts, not tents, because the weather is so bad (rather basic, but they were improved for the group in following year). Stroll up Camel Mountain, up cinders and snowfields, but still in cloud. Bengt wanders off to collect plants. Huge dinner, then to bed, still in cloud.



Jen's very favourite photo of Koryaksky, because it got her into The Times, as part of Jan's travel feature.



Sam and Jen on the crater rim of Avacha, with the black lava dome surrounded by jets of escaping steam.

Tuesday September 1, Avacha

Starry night, both volcanoes in silhouette. Up at 6.00 for breakfast in darkness, and leave at 7.30 for a hard day's walk climbing 1800 metres to the summit; Jan wisely opts out; Bengt is certainly not up to it. Impressed that Nikolay wears only rubber wellie boots, and no socks but just woollen scarves wrapped carefully round his feet and ankles; and carries a great rucksack full of food etc; he is a true mountain guide.

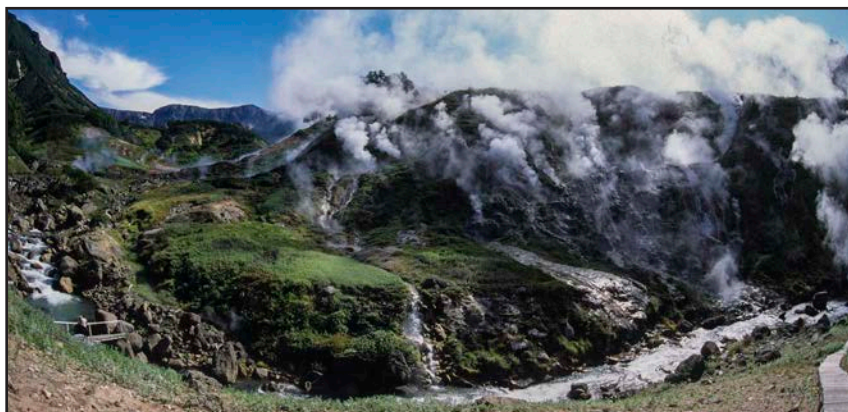
Long, steep, slow slog up a rocky ridge between snowfields, up to shoulder, which looks like a caldera rim but is actually the head of a lateral collapse that developed about 30,000 years ago. Wonderful walk gently rising along the shoulder, with great views of Koryaksky, to another abandoned volcanology hut. Then 700m of ascent up summit cone (built largely within the last 5000 years), on thin zigzag path over cinders and welded ash flows. Jen is faster, while Sam and I struggle behind until better hauling ourselves up a fixed rope for the last bit to the crater rim. Fabulous spot, with steaming lava dome inside, many fumaroles and solfataras, and views over cloud to volcanoes in all directions. Huge lunch carried up by Nikolay; meats, cheeses, bread, jam, apples, hot coffee. Walk round crater rim to the 1991 lava overflow and fine sulphur deposits around steaming vents. After two hours set off back down. Sam and I run the scree slopes, but then it is hard work over the steep slopes of welded ash.

Into cloud below rim of the lateral collapse, and slower descent into camp by 5pm. Celebratory champagne and vodka toasts before another huge dinner, then pack up and go down in our 6WD bus, back to Avacha Hotel. Welcome hot bath, cramped, and only possible with Jan's multi-plug cover to replace the wooden horror.

Wednesday September 2, Valley of Geysers

Another amazing breakfast, and attempts at sorting out the graceless Bengt. Then 9.30 rush off to heliport. Road through town then post villages, farms and dachas. The MI-8 helicopter, with its huge single rotor, has 24 seats and large windows, not opening, but clean for excellent views. Round coast under low cloud, only 20 metres above tree tops; lovely taiga and tundra, and three brown bears in a water meadow. Then up a deep valley direct to the Valley of Geysers, above the clouds, in the first bright sunshine under a cloudless sky.

Guided walk for two hours round the near part of the Valley, all on good boardwalks (with Anna, another teacher who has not been paid). Lots of good geysers going almost constantly (the Russians call them spouters). Some good mud pots and boiling pools. One spectacular bowl with ten geysers spaced across a bank of geyserite above the river. Downstream and the Malyi Geyser spouts out at 45° every half hour or so. Excellent salmon dinner in the timber lodge. Could have stayed longer.



Multiple small geysers on the main geyserite bank within the Valley of Geysers.

Flight back goes over steaming lakes in the Uzon caldera, Then fly past Karimsky volcano, which has Strombolian eruptions about every eight minutes; pilot saw one in the distance on approach, so the helicopter just slowly circled the lovely symmetrical cone until it went off again, for great views from our windows. Back past Koryaksky and then a clear approach to the Yelisovo heliport. A really great excursion, and an absolute winner with landings at Uzon and Karimsky added on for the group tour.



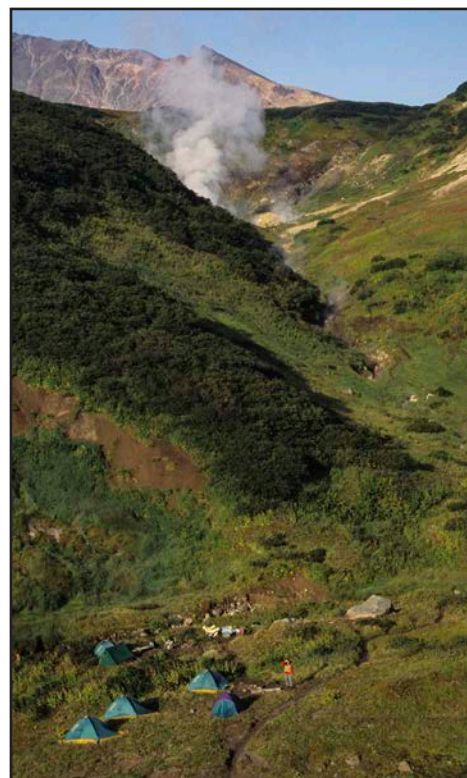
Strombolian eruption of Karimsky, seen from the helicopter.

Van into town, for good walkabout. Spectacular earthquake proofing of old blocks of flats, with concrete ribs and tie bars, but work has stopped with the economic collapse. Department store has lots of stock in random distribution, including food on all four floors. A fine market has good ice creams, all in a sunny evening with locals all out, including spectacular miniskirts; people selling mushrooms that they have gathered in the woods, anything for cash when they are not getting paid. Bus back out to hotel, easy and only 2 roubles (about 10p); fare is new as the town buses used to be free. Another good dinner with lots of talking; Andrey Stepanchuk (the office manager) and Costa call by to answer endless queries, and share jokes about the humourless Bengt.

Thursday September 3, Dachnye

Cloudy morning again. Long talk with Ingor (the Icelandic manager of Lena and Friends), and there should be no problems for the 1999 tour. Leave at 10.30 in Sasha's truck, with Nikolay, Irena and Andrey, and boring Bengt trailing along. Out beneath low cloud, across the delta and up the Paratunka valley on a new road. Heading for a new power station following the pylons (cables are not yet fitted), up onto the plateau east of Gorely; and suddenly above the clouds in clear sunshine.

Spectacular panorama of all three big volcanoes: Mutnovsky with its ice summit and huge steam plume, Gorely shield volcano with many parasitic cones, and the huge andesite cone of Vilyuchi.



Our camp below the Dachnye geysers.

Follow the dirt road to a scene of chaos and junk at its end: the remains of a 20-years-long programme of drilling for geothermal power. Now a construction camp for building a power station, with many steaming boreholes and dangerous pipework amid a sea of mud, with workers' huts all on sledges that are dragged up here by army tanks.

We set up camp beside a stream in the green Dachnye valley just beyond, a few minutes downstream of the confluence of a warm stream and a cold stream. Up the warm stream to a small, wild geothermal area, with many fumaroles, small geysers and hot mud pools; our very own and a delight. Excellent lunch with tables and chairs by a campfire by the stream. Then Sasha leaves in his truck, and we pitch 2-man tents, before a walkabout to yet more fumaroles. Clouds come and go through a lazy afternoon. Then a good salmon dinner, and it is cold when the sun goes down.

Friday September 4, Mutnovsky

Breakfast at 6.30 in the dark, and we (Nikolay, Andrey and the four of us) leave at 7.30 up past the geothermal basin. Irena stays with the camp, and Bengt wanders about on his own. Two hours walk up and over a saddle, then a long traverse round the slopes of Mutnovsky across a mix of andesite lava, pumice banks and steep snowfields. Eventually reach the gorge that is the only outlet from the caldera. Superb, with walls of pyroclastic flows laced with dykes, and an easy walk along a floor of compacted snow that has the warm river in a tunnel beneath, passing some patches of small snow pinnacles capped with volcanic ash.

From the end of the valley's great snow-fill we have a fantastic panorama of glaciers within the caldera and numerous fumaroles, including some rising from crevasses and ice caves where descending ice meets rising steam. Traverse along cinder slope, passing the tunnel mouth that takes the hot river beneath the snowbank. Trail follows the floor of a mini-valley between the glacier and the caldera wall, passing roaring fumaroles, solfataras and boiling mud pools, to a dry lake bed with bedded sulphur and splendid mud pots. We stop for relaxed picnic lunch beside meltwater stream that flows warm out from one glacier and into the next. A wonderful location, in warm sunshine. Then walk a bit further and up a rope-assisted climb to a high, steep arête between the main caldera and the most active crater (a few hundred metres wide and deep). Look across to huge fumaroles beneath the giant steam plume that is visible from afar.

Walk back the same way, and one steaming solfatara has changed into a boiling mud pool due to meltwater changes as the day warms up. Long walk back to Dachnye is not hard, but very wearing. Back into camp after 12 hours (next year's group will avoid the long walk-in with a camp set up just below the caldera's exit gorge). An excellent meal prepared by Irena, and then we soak in the hot stream; Jan and I with a great foot-bath, but Sam and Jen completely into a deep pool. Bengt remains bored and barmy (who sold him this trip?). End of a fabulous day; must rank as one of the world's great geological excursions.



Glacier and fumaroles within the Mutnovsky caldera.

Snow traverse on the long approach to Mutnovsky.



Climbing the caldera wall to see into the active crater.

Fumaroles escaping through crevasses in the ice.

Layered ice and snow carved by geothermal steam.

Scenes within the magnificent caldera of Mutnovky.



Saturday September 5, Gorely

Breakfast at 8.00, then walk up to the construction camp, where Nikolay has fixed a lift in a truck over to Gorely. Up and across the main plateau, then down a steep bank to an old lakebed and round to the foot of the shield volcano.

Long plod up on tundra, washed ash, snowfields and some patches of aa lava, and passing a few large marmots. Lunch near the top. Complex of craters 300 m deep has an ice lake in one crater beneath a drained shelf; further west the deeper, active crater has a warm, acid lake with solfataras around rim of inner crater and close to lake level. A spectacular walk for Nikolay and myself along narrow, high arete that is the main crater rim. Long walk back down, and the truck returns to pick us up for ride back to Dachnye. Another great day.

Sasha is back for the day with another group, and news that all prices are doubling because the rouble has crashed against the dollar. Many locals come up to Dachnye for days out on the weekend, and some come down to the 'hot tubs' along our stream.

Sunday September 6, Paratunka

Beautiful clear morning and warm for a late breakfast of chicken, mash and salad; such good food all the time (they claim to get the best from Alaska). Pack up camp, and Sasha arrives with his truck at midday. Drive back with great views of the Paratunka valley, and a stop to haul a car out of the mud on a track towards Vilyuchi (no problem with our 6WD truck).



Nikolay on the narrow rim of the shield volcano, of Gorely. with the cold crater lake below, and the hot crater lake out of sight beyond the dark ridge.

Stop at Virginia Hotel at Blue Lagoon geothermal resort; good rooms, bathrooms down the corridor. Andrey shows us round, and then big goodbyes to Nikolay, Irena, Costa, Sasha (and Bengt); Jan gives Irena her much-admired Volcano tee-shirt (from a film promo). Sam and Jan have afternoon swim in warm lido, then beers and Cokes beside the pool. Short walk to old dormitory blocks decorated with old posters from communist-block games at Sofia and Havana. Good pork dinner and a late night.

Monday September 7, Petropavlosk

Up at 8am to cloudy morning and breakfast, before Andrey comes to take us into town. Off to shops with Costa's lovely wife. Exchange rate is now 17R = \$1, but street prices have not changed. Bus into town and a well-hidden art shop, where we buy a labradorite pendant, then back to hotel for another massive lunch.

Sam and Jen leave afterwards, and we are sad to see them go. Jan and I go to the Volcano Institute for a short presentation about the Kamchatka volcanoes; lots of fascinating info; Tolbachik eruption in 1976 was amazing (visiting the northern volcanoes would have been hugely expensive with two days each way in trucks, all too much for the planned tour); big block of black sulphur hauled from floor of hot lake in Uzon looks too much like pahoehoe.

Back to hotel, then off on our own. Long bus ride out to far southern end of town past endless docks, container port and military bases. Huge dinner again, and Ingor arrives to sort out any last thoughts for next year, which is going to be so good.

Tuesday September 8, Sea of Okhotsk

Up at 7.30 for a good breakfast and then bus into town. Office of Kamchatintour is closed, so we abandon that link, as Lena and Nikolay are so good. Photos in Lenin Square, where the obligatory statue is known to the locals as 'Batman', and went into Fisheries Museum when we were looking for a Folk Museum (which we never found). Bus back to Siluet near our hotel, and walk to beautiful old church with onion domes and fabulous icon screens. Could not change money and now 19R = \$1.

Left hotel at 12.30 for airport. Chaos in domestic terminal, then flight delayed for an hour while a huge box is unloaded from our plane. Good meal on the Pulkovo flight, and then views of huge floods along Amur River on descent into Khabarovsk. Some confusion until baggage is found in busy arrivals area, then walk 50 metres to a trolley-bus into town for 1.5R (ie 14p for both of us, compared with a car for £40 offered by Intourist). Good ride in along beautiful boulevards in a fine city. Stop close to vast hotel, and they are waiting for us at Reception; a welcome very different from older communist days. Good room on the 7th floor, with great views from the roof.

Walkabout in town; good street of bars but no handy pavement cafes. Fantastic food store, stocked like Harrods, so buy smoked salmon, rolls, beer and Coke for supper in hotel (too much food in the past few days). Train tickets are waiting for us at travel desk in hotel, but changing money is still difficult, as they have run out of roubles. Lazy evening after a long day, with two hours of time difference.



Jan beside one of the small geysers in the Dachnye.



Desperate for ready cash, unpaid professional families sell mushrooms that they have gathered in the forests.

Below: Flooding in the valley of the Amur River.



Wednesday September 9, Khabarovsk

Huge storm in night and grey morning, so not up until 8.00 for a mediocre breakfast served by bimbos. Walkabout to river, through lovely parkland, then sun comes out over ferries and ships on the water. Ice cream is very good. Up into town, lovely boulevards and fine old houses. Queues for bread, but big store has plenty of food, and we buy a block of cheese on their crazy triple queue system (order-pay-collect). Check out of hotel, then short walk to #2 bus for 1.5R each (as opposed to \$10 for the hotel shuttle bus) to the train station. New exchange rate is 20R = \$1. Large waiting room and good electronic signs in the station. Buy bits of food from many shops and a market in the square out front.

Train #1, the Rossiya, comes in 20 minutes late from Vladivostok, but departs on time (at 2pm local time), with 19 coaches and electric loco. We have an excellent two-berth compartment. Adjacent compartments have a thug and his moll clad entirely in leather, a drunken nutter who is escorted off the train by police, and a totally spaced-out 12-year-old girl.

Over the Amur River, across the flooded area, then lots of taiga and birch. Some fine villages in lovely valleys; less flooding into the evening. A few tunnels through low hills. Train stops for a bit when we hear six booming explosions; sound more military than quarry blast, and we feel a direct air pressure wave; mysterious.

Dining car for good salad, kebab and chips, but few people in. Each coach of the train has its own coal-fired heater, for which a man wearing an overcoat and rubber boots carries buckets of coal through the dining car at regular intervals. Mostly we can dine off the station stalls; a long stop at 5pm has dozens of stalls with hot and cold food by local people. One town has a hundred diesel locos dumped in a yard; electrification of the line has only recently been completed. Coach radios come on with music at 8pm, very Chinese style, but then quiet at night.

Thursday September 10, Siberia

Major electric storm during the night, but all very cosy in the comfort of our own compartment. Soon clear the bedding into the bins, and enjoy a cloudless day across beautiful country; lots of birches, not much else, colours go from green to yellow, just touches of red. At Skovorodino, leap off train to buy breakfast of potato, stuffed dumplings, meat pelmini (like ravioli) and beer.

Then more birch trees. Gradients, curves and tunnels make the journey a slow trundle. Villages of wooden houses and neat allotments. Few towns with tower blocks; many large buildings abandoned, political or military?



The rather fine city of Khabarovsk.



Waiting to catch the Rossiya, the Trans-Siberian Express.



Vegetable plot beside the railway in a Siberian village..



Typical stretch of the Trans-Siberian Railway across the low rolling country of eastern Siberia.

A few lumber yards, and scrap metal yards for old steam and diesel locos. Rolling country, and line winds in huge loops round valleys and hills, so still slow. Mogocha is a fine town of old wooden houses along dirt roads inside a huge river bend, with large railway yards and the best platform food stalls yet. Dinner of kebab again, and we pass a gold dredge floating in its pond at the end of a valley floored with tailings.

Friday September 11, Lake Baikal

Wake to a clear morning with ground frost, fog banks and steaming lakes around huge city of Chita. Lots of derelict factories; bizarre. More farmed arable land in the Chita valley, but then up over hills with birch and spruce. Short stop at Mogzon, on wide valley floor with cattle in pastures. Good pancake stalls (with blueberries and cedar cone nuts), but no time to buy. Then pine forests and lumber yards in villages; the only crop is grass except in village garden vegetable plots. Trees are probably cedar, very red.

Pass through Bada with storage of MiG fighter planes, then large opencast coal mine in valley floor. Many villages and towns; very different from farther east; not much lost opportunity west of Chita. Ulan Ude is a large city beside a wide river. Then dinner (kebabs again but very good) with sun setting over Lake Baikal. Goes dark, for a short sleep before we arrive in Irkutsk at 12.40 after midnight. Hotel bus at the station, but we had a transfer in our ticket booking. Five minutes to the Intourist Hotel, into a small room, and sleep.

Saturday September 12, Irkutsk

Up at 9.00 for views across the Angara River from a vacated ninth-floor room, then very good buffet breakfast. Could not change money because of a huge rebound in the currency exchange rate, which is so now 11R = \$1, and all banks and exchanges offices are closed because they don't want to release roubles.

Walkabout in town is brilliant, even though it is a dull day. Old wooden houses are splendid, many subsided but standing from 100 years ago; many in the heart of town except for grand stone buildings along main streets. Town is quiet, but then we find a huge new market seething with people after 11am. So many stalls and so many folk buying; black leather shoes, some miniskirts and lots of furs. Huge new department store only part open, and vast indoor market with an abundance of food.

Catch a minibus to the Angara dam, to see large marina with splendid yachts and many hydrofoils. Bus back into town for beer and coke in delightful ambience of the market. Walk back to hotel for dinner in near-empty restaurant. Bars on each floor of the hotel, over-staffed with few people around. Good sunset view from our room.



Old wooden houses and one of many churches in Irkutsk.

Sunday September 13, Moscow

Good breakfast watching a Dutch group with a classic 'anorak' who arrived at breakfast wearing his outdoor gear with a water bottle, shoulder bag and day-rucksack, and sits on his own; almost Mr Bean, or Bengt. Hotel van to airport, where Transaero has its own terminal, really quite efficient. Good flight with excellent beef dinner (at 10am) and views of snowy central Asia mountains. Clear into Moscow, and bus #551 to Metro, so just over an hour to our hotel: the Moskva, a huge monolith with large rooms in a brilliant central location, with a fearsome restaurant that we avoid.

Walk out to Red Square (Krasnaya Ploshchad; originally this meant 'beautiful square' but came to mean Red after communism). Jan is impressed by St Basil's and we go inside to its psychedelic maze of decorated chapels. Crowds of people make a great atmosphere in Red Square, so different from the gloom of 1984. No guards on the ignored Lenin Tomb. GUM store is spectacular and affluent, but Bolshoi is not open for visitors. Then to huge triple-level underground mall, with a domed skylight that is a map of the northern hemisphere and lies beneath fountains in the huge Square above. Fantastic, so rich, so not communist. [We were there just before the end of the short-lived boom, when the entire middle class then lost all their wealth in the economic chaos and devaluation of the rouble.] Up above, a band in military uniforms plays Jacko's 'I just called to say I love you'. But the best is a 7-piece stringed group playing classics in a subway; absolute magic from part of the main state orchestra moonlighting because no-one is being paid since the Soviet collapse.

We have pizza in a fast-food outlet, sitting outside people-watching; no mobs, lots of well-dressed couples. Then back to Red Square to see St Basil's under floodlight. Then back to hotel at 11pm, after a 5-hour time-change and a 6-hour flight; so a long day, but really good.



When the entire Soviet economy collapsed, so that state employees were not paid, members of the Moscow Orchestra performed in a subway just to get some ready cash to buy food; beautiful music from the best-ever buskers.

Monday September 14, Moscow and home

Beautiful morning, long walks from and to our room for an OK breakfast in the rather bleak hotel restaurant. Leave bags in hotel, then out across Red Square for photos of St Basil's in morning light. Take the Metro out to the southwestern suburbs, to parkland, in which the beautiful Novodevichy monastery has a fantastic wall of 79 golden icons inside its church. Back to town on trolley-bus, then into Kremlin to see the classic sites; marvellous icons in the Annunciation Cathedral; beautiful domes on the churches. Outside for pavement drinks and ice creams, and a walk round the old shops behind the Bolshoi.

Collect bags from the hotel, take Metro to the end of the line, then express bus (6R each and 1R per bag) so easy to reach Sheremetevo-2 airport. Flight to London over cloud. Long wait for train at St Pancras, and back home by 11.30 at night. [We both go into work as usual at 7.30 next morning, and on Wednesday I leave for a 10-day project in Vietnam's Halong Bay.]

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