



KAMCHATKA

Words: Julia Pickering • Photos: Martin Hartley

Blue cheese for breakfast struck me as strange. But that's how our first morning began – in a Moscow hotel – before embarking on one of the longest domestic flights in the world. Our destination was the Kamchatka peninsula in far Eastern Russia – a journey across eight time zones in a single country. The region is a fire breathing dichotomy of ice and active volcanoes. Our target was Klyuchevskaya Sopka which, at 4,750m, is the highest active volcano in Eurasia. Vigorously active in fact, averaging an eruption every other year – making it one of the most active volcanoes in the world. We planned to ski and snowboard it.

On landing in Kamchatka's capital, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsk, the recently awakened Koryaksky volcano towered over us. She appeared fierce and huge. When I asked Igor about her, our local Russian guide told me she was only 3,456m high – 1,300m smaller than our objective. I tried to hide my astonishment but I doubt I succeeded.

The following morning, after a paltry two hours' sleep, I awoke vomiting – the reason why remains unclear, but I imagine the blue cheese might have been partly responsible. At 6am, we were set to embark on a 600km off-road drive and I couldn't keep even a glass of water down. As the rest of the team – my husband Warwick, mountain buddies Richard

and Kiersten and expedition photographer, Martin Hartley – all looked fearful of the prospect of ending up seated beside me on our journey, Igor insisted I sit up front beside him. Brave man. At least I had a tiny plastic sick bag for my travels. Heavy snowfall marked the start of our journey North, but as we crossed the bridge over the Kamchatka River, the skies began to clear. We could just make out the black symmetrical shape of the infamous Tolbachik erupting. Klyuchevskaya, however remained coy, hidden behind a veil of cloud.

After ten hours on the road we were nearing our destination, the small Russian locality and military airbase of Klyuchi. Our intention was to take snowmobiles on a 45km journey through the taiga and onto the tundra as close as we could get to what would be our main camp at the base of the volcano. Having previously worked as an Arctic snowmobile guide in Greenland, I considered myself fully prepared for this journey. What I did not take into account was Greenland's lack of trees compared to Kamchatka's abundance of them. As it turns out, birch trees and snowmobiles are poor bedfellows. After several near decapitations we emerged onto the uplands in a complete white-out. It wasn't until the following evening that we reached as far as we could get by snowmobile – in the midst of a storm.

We were a long way short of where we'd hoped to be. We set up camp and hugged our drivers goodbye. As I staked the last guy rope to our tent, the clouds parted for the briefest glimpse of our volcano. She appeared momentarily like the snow queen on her throne, reigning over this icy wilderness. Then she was gone.

It was another two days before we were able to move to our planned camp at the base of Klyuchevskaya. One of my biggest concerns before setting out to Kamchatka was the snow cover on the volcano. Being extremely active she is constantly spewing ash and lava which can affect the snow on the upper slopes, that are also covered in loose rock. In addition, due to its Pacific Ocean location, the Kamchatka peninsula can suffer from some extreme winds that can cause the volcanic ash from the surrounding volcanoes to be blown onto Klyuchevskaya and melt her snow cover. We had picked what should have been the optimum time of year in terms of snow cover – reasonable temperatures and stable weather. It was a rare blue-sky day with no wind when we made our way across the high plateau to the bottom of the mountain pass between Klyuchevskaya and the adjacent extinct volcano, Kamen. As we approached I scrutinised her every ridge and gully, constantly seeking out what would be the optimum descent.

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Klyuchevskaya is considered sacred by some indigenous peoples, being viewed by them as the location of the world's creation. Located almost on the International Date Line, Kamchatka is one of the first places to see the sunrise every day. It is said that when the god Volkov created the world, this was the point at which he held it, and so it remains unfinished, unsealed – hence the volcanic activity. I gazed up at her, towering above our tiny camp, and all her other volcanic neighbours, including the vigorously active Shiveluch. Yet, it was Klyuchevskaya that appeared the most godlike to me. She was in charge of everything here – every cloud that appeared in the sky, each gust of wind, all the snowflakes that fell, the two lonesome ravens we occasionally observed, and now us.

We were seriously vulnerable to her mood swings with only a piece of thin tent fabric to protect us from whatever emotion she felt that day. The landscape surrounding her was as barren as the moon. Some days she would be blanketed with starched white snow, and on others coated with ash grey stripes, like a zebra's hide, the heat of which made the snow feel almost spring-like. A rare good weather day allowed us an acclimatisation trip to the volcanologists' hut on the saddle (3,300m) between Klyuchevskaya and Kamen. The hut was cosy with a

wood burning stove (only to be used in emergencies), but too small to sleep our team. We left a supply of food and fuel there before retreating back to our camp, beating another bout of inclement weather by minutes.

We had been camp-bound for so long, with strong winds and heavy snow, that we were convinced our luck had to change and we would get our weather window. When the regular evening weather report came through on our Yellowbrick Tracker, warning us of winds in excess of 160kph reaching us by the following evening, we all agreed – the next day had to be spent protecting our camp. A satellite telephone call confirmed it was time to batten down the hatches even further. We reinforced our snow walls threefold and built a snow-cave toilet. The problem was, in this fiery intense land, a snowstorm was not always just a snowstorm.

When Klyuchevskaya was spitting out vitriol from her crater, combined with the churning wind, our camp became surrounded amidst a volcanic rock storm. Think sandstorm, but with ash and flying rocks. The ash gets into every nook and cranny, embedded into places you never even knew existed. The rocks hit you like bullets fired by unknown assailants. I think we all fell asleep that night a little anxious about what was to come.

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It was after midnight when I awoke to a tent pole almost touching my face. Our fragile sanctuary was feeling like it was about to be torn out of the ground and vanish inside a huge tornado. The wind had changed direction and our porch had filled with snow. Occasionally everything went calm, just for a moment, before the next blast raged down the volcanic ocean and hit us like a monstrous tidal wave.

Throughout the night I learnt which thundering roars would hit our tent and which would miss, allowing us to brace ourselves for each impact. Inside the shaking shelter, with darkness outside, all sorts of scenarios were playing themselves out within my head. Klyuchevskaya and Kamen were battling behind us; there was no doubt in my mind. I imagined lightning bolts flashing across the sky, racing winged horses on one side, fire-tongued dragons on the other, crashing together in one gigantic frenzied inferno. It wasn't us they were after; we were of no consequence to them. No, we were just pawns in their fiery battle; neither volcano cared what happened to us. The tent fabric was being peppered by tiny holes as the rock perforated our snow wall. We needed to be ready for the possibility that our safe haven could be ripped from over us. Helmets on inside the tent had become a necessity. We had packed everything up and anchored down our kit bags so we wouldn't lose anything. We sat and waited.

By this point, our snow cave toilet had become an increasingly desirable shelter. At around 5am another thunderous rumble sent the biggest blow yet and our reinforced snow wall came crashing down on top of us. We crawled out on our hands and knees, braving the storm to inspect the damage. Standing was not an option. Surprisingly, our broken home looked rectifiable. Hunkered down, we attempted to begin rebuilding. But minutes later the wind blasted upon us again and from our crouched position, we were propelled through the remaining snow block, into the tent. We made a beeline for the only refuge left – the snow cave toilet.

To our unstinting disappointment, our weather window never came. Klyuchevskaya Sopka is considered Kamchatka's deadliest volcano and we had undeniably encountered just how ferocious she could be. We left her alone to continue to govern over this brutal, unruly land.

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