

Altai's Strawberry Fields Forever

By [Vladimir Ryzhkov](#)

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The people of Altai are not lazy; they just like to meditate and reflect on life,” said Sam Salavat, a prime example of the ethnic Altai people. He did not seem to be talking to me at all, but to some unseen critic of his people’s lifestyle. His words offered a challenge and an alternative to the way of life familiar to most city people.

Sam Salavat is one of the authoritative indigenous people and custodians of the Chulyshman River Valley in the Altai republic. Many years ago, despite his wife’s pleas, Salavat refused to move into town and trade his traditional mountain lifestyle for an urban apartment. His mother did the same, continuing to live out her declining years in a high-altitude settlement, leaving empty an apartment her son had purchased for her in the republic’s capital, Gorno-Altai. After this summer’s natural disasters, when the residents of Russia’s big cities suffered from intense heat and thick smog, it is worth recalling that another way of life exists, quite different and in many ways much healthier than our existence in filthy urban agglomerations deprived of clean air and water.

Along with Altai’s hot, dry weather of July and August comes the main harvest event: cutting and gathering hay. At the old family settlement in Balyk in the Chulyshman Valley, Karan, 20,

and his 24-year-old brother Andrei gather together with the rest of the family: Gorno-Altai University student Tuyul, three sisters with their husbands and children, and, finally, their mother. (Their father died of a serious illness several years back.) Here, in wide sunny fields, they mow the tall grass, dry it, rake it into haystacks and store it in the barn to feed the family's cattle through the long Siberian winter. Today, the brothers are helped by a neighbor who has his own plot of land beyond the nearby stream and who serves as the caretaker of an apple orchard owned by the local school. In all, Andrei and Karan's family must prepare about 500 small haystacks. In their free time, the women scatter along the hillside and gather ripe, fragrant wild strawberries that thickly cover the steep mountain slopes.

There is no livestock in the valley during the summer. Each spring, cows, sheep, goats, and young mares and stallions climb the narrow mountain paths to high alpine pastures where picturesque Altai settlements dot the meadows along the banks of the taiga rivers. There, the cattle make their way to the ancient forests across meadows lying directly beneath the clouds, breaking as they go the densely growing branches of raspberry bushes, black and red currant, hawthorn and honeysuckle. The meadows, poised so close to heaven, are themselves a thick and colorful blanket of grasses and flowers that fill the air with the sweet smell of honey.

If the whole extended family pitches in (five children is not unusual for Altai families), and if the weather is good, they can gather the hay they need in two or three weeks. They rise at dawn and start working as soon as the grass dries a bit. They end their workday when the sun drops behind the mountains and the evening chill quickly sets in. The men scythe the hay, and the women rake it into piles. They must drink a lot on hot days, but rivers and streams of crystal-clear cold water are always nearby.

In the fall, when the first snow falls on the highlands, the cattle descend from their summer pastures down into the Chulyshman, Bashkaus and Chui valleys for the winter. Cows, goats and sheep are put into sheds and barns, while horses go it alone up in the mountains all winter, using their hooves to dig up frozen grass from beneath the snow. The local people also keep gardens where they grow potatoes and other vegetables that they pickle and marinade. Many people keep beehives, and the women cook jams using both wild and homegrown berries.

Gathering firewood is another important seasonal task for the people of the Altai. The local authorities allocate specific felling sites toward this end, but help is also provided by the turbulent waters of the mountain rivers. Every spring, the water throws huge heaps of driftwood onto the shores and shoals of the river, the logs stripped of their bark by the rocks and rapids and whitened by the sun. Then, when the river freezes solid, the people use horses to pull the driftwood over the ice back to their encampments, where they saw and chop it for firewood.

Many of the local residents are hunters and fishermen, and in recent years, tourism has been developing in the more remote Altai districts. Salavat is among those with a small tourist base consisting of several wooden houses, a kitchen and a banya. In the evening he switches on his diesel generator to provide electricity for the camp. The income from the short tourist season supplements traditional sources of cash, primarily selling cattle for meat. The family usually sells four or five cows per year for an average of 9,000 rubles (\$300) each.

There is no electricity in the Chulyshman Valley, and with the exception of a single village, no cell phone coverage. The Katuyaryk Pass is steep and dangerous. Not every car can handle its slopes, and it is often closed in the winter because of snow and blizzards. Last spring, the only bridge over the Bashkaus River was completely swept away.

Life in the taiga is severe. It requires constant physical exertion and a good knowledge of local conditions and survival skills. But this region is blessed with pure air and water, as well as rivers and lakes teeming with fish. Berries and mushrooms grow in abundance, and the region is richly populated with animals and birds. The nearby Altai Nature Reserve aims to protect the unique biodiversity of the Teletskoye mountain taiga. And Lake Teletskoye itself is listed as a UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site. At night, the sky high above the Chulyshman and Bashkaus rivers is transformed into a dazzling, thick carpet of stars and constellations.

Let life in the big cities remain the ideal of comfortable and successful living for most of today's people. But peering through the haze of toxic smog that long blanketed Moscow, the fields of wild strawberries in Altai presented a very attractive alternative!

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