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Welcome to Kamchatka

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Your day starts here. First the sky brightens over Big Diomede Island in the Bering Strait. The sun rises next on Chukotka — frozen, barely populated. Light comes then to the long strip of land called Kamchatka: it touches craters, ski hills, cement apartment blocks, fishing vessels. Day breaks over Avacha Bay. In another eight hours, it will get to Moscow.

Dawn skims over 500 kilometers of ground and meets the Pacific again before reaching any cities on the mainland of Russia's Far East. "The mainland," or "the continent," is what locals call the rest of Russia, because although Kamchatka is a peninsula, it might as well be an island: no roads connect it to the world. There are no railroad tracks. Even the main street in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, the region's capital, turns to gravel at the city limits, then to dirt, then ends at a river in a forest somewhere.

The peninsula is isolated from the rest of the country, but it still feels Russian. You find the same balding men dressed in fatigues. Women take out baby wipes to clean mud from their high heels. The bottoms of tree trunks are painted white. There are flower shops, fruit vendors, and doughnut stands lining the sidewalk in Petropavlovsk just like you'd find

in any other Russian city with a couple hundred thousand people.

Still, this place where a country begins is, in some ways, unique. In many, it's spectacular. When you stand in Petropavlovsk's center and look across Avacha Bay, you see the low steady lights of Vilyuchinsk, a military town closed to visitors. Atomic submarines float off its shore. Helicopters pass overhead. Vilyuchinsk stands out as a monument to Kamchatka's recent past: the entire peninsula was a closed region until 1991. No foreigners were permitted here, and even Russians needed a special dispensation to visit.

Now one-third of Kamchatka is protected wilderness. The peninsula is dotted with volcanoes. It trembles from earthquakes. Thermal springs break out of the mountains, and geysers burst from the ground, and stones like stained glass cover some valleys, and you can drink the tap water in Kamchatka. You can drink the tap water in Kamchatka! Isn't this a Russian miracle? Aren't you glad you came?

The sun in your sky shone first on Kamchatka. This blog will chronicle that truth and all the others it suggests: The Kamchatka peninsula is no random spot, no casual settlement, but a land that offers beauty, vitality and hope to its country. People here are positioned on the brink of something, of everything. So from the tip of the country, from the beginning of your day, what news does Kamchatka bring the rest of Russia and the world?

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