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Bear Country

By Julia Phillips

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"People don't understand Kamchatka," a friend told me after I first arrived. "They don't know where it is or what it looks like. They imagine bears roam the streets here."

"I saw a bear on the street yesterday," I said.

"Really?" he said, looking only mildly surprised. "Where?"

"In the central market," I said, then laughed. "A captive bear on a leash to advertise the circus."

"Oh. Yes. Well, truthfully, sometimes wild bears do come into the city."

Russians in my company occasionally disavow their culture's more stereotypical moments. I think these omissions are fair; life on this peninsula and in this country is more subtle and strange than a few instances would allow. But the bear stereotype — ah, the bear stereotype — I'm afraid that one has teeth on Kamchatka.

When the weather was better, warnings were constant: don't walk alone; when in the woods, make noise by talking or singing; carry fireworks or horns. This summer, a man and his teenage daughter were killed by a bear 40 kilometers outside the regional capital, Petropavlovsk; bears killed one person here last year and three people in 2009. The risk of attack is slim but constant.

I didn't take the threat seriously until the first weekend I went camping here, when I woke up to my tent-mate screaming, "Bear! Bear! Bear!" Other campers were shouting from the hills around us, setting off fireworks and slamming on their car horns. She ripped open our tent flap, stumbled into her boots, and fled toward the cars. The rest of us ran after her in various states of undress. Ten meters away from where we shivered and shouted, a hunched brown figure hurried into the bushes.

Later, I told my research supervisor that I'd seen my first bear. "I've really arrived on Kamchatka now!"

She raised her eyebrows. "Where was it? Far out of the city?" She smiled at me and said, "You know, people think that bears are everywhere here. They think we keep bears as pets and take them to the banya with us."

"Oh," I said. "So that's not true?"

"No, it's not, thank you," she said. "Although last weekend, I took a walk near my house and spotted bear tracks there."

At last count, there were more than 10,000 brown bears on Kamchatka. Though there's no word on the number of unicycles or vodka bottles, you still may be able to find some of stereotypical Russia here. Just be sure, if you go looking, to bring fireworks and a few friends.

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