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Visiting the Capital

By Julia Phillips

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"Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky is not a city. It's a phantom," journalist Dmitry Gubin wrote in a recent article in Ogonyok magazine.

He was referring to Petropavlovsk's many shortcomings: It's empty, ugly, and hard to get around; Internet is so expensive that a gigabyte of traffic costs as much as a kilogram of caviar. Though locals asked him to return in the winter, he tells his readers that one trip to Petropavlovsk is enough. He'll never go back.

Designer Artemy Lebedev was also underwhelmed by Petropavlovsk. His photos of the city, published on his web site, are framed with sarcasm. "Since my last visit, the city has become even prettier," he writes above a picture of a cement building filled with broken glass. The caption above a photo of a huge mud puddle with gold domes in the background reads, "They've even built a church."

His photographs might as well be postcards from an industrial wasteland. ("Come visit scenic Petropavlovsk, city of a hundred rusted-out car frames!")

Is this city generally beautiful? No. The few roads here are split and pitted. Apartment buildings are reinforced with shuddering sheets of tin. Stores close early and streetlights don't turn on. Black smoke rises from the hills. There are no boardwalks, no yacht clubs, no affordable hotels. Parts of it are overrun with rust and ice.

But even if Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky had less — if it had no sidewalks, no buses, no fresh bread — it would still be worth visiting for two reasons:

First, because it is populated by the kindest people you'll ever meet. (''They're so open, welcoming and talkative that it's really a treasure,'' Gubin writes.)

Second, because Petropavlovsk has look-out points from which you can see the surrounding peninsula. From the shore of Avacha Bay, you can see snow-capped volcanoes, and suddenly the tired city behind you doesn't seem so important. The long flight and the sluggishness of your e-mail become manageable. It's worth your time to come to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, because being in this city means you've finally reached miraculous and beautiful Kamchatka.

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