The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Cohabiting with Natural Disaster

By Julia Phillips

December 09, 2011



Like Iceland, Patagonia, and Alaska, Kamchatka has been called a "land of fire and ice". Taken literally, this title is a perfect fit: the peninsula is sealed with permafrost in the north and lined with glaciers, and it holds 160 volcanoes, 29 of those active, one the largest in the Northern Hemisphere. But beyond its function as a tidy statement of fact, this phrase serves as an evocation of Kamchatka's infinite contrasts.

Yes, here you will find both fire and ice. You will often even spot them layered on top of each other, snow piled on an active volcano, looking like white clay covered with India ink. You'll also find an entire surrounding world of opposites: the silent green nature park and the Gazprom pipeline zigzagging through its territory; the rivers clotted with spawning salmon and the predators, bears and humans both, wading in to poach; the hundred tourist agencies pressed shoulder to shoulder in the city and the neighboring settlements closed by law to foreign visitors.

And if, like me, you are visiting Petropavlovsk from someplace that doesn't lie along a fault line, you may find the city's close-set apartment buildings an odd match to the peninsula's

constant seismic events. A bright glass high-rise has been erected in Petropavlovsk's historical center. A 16-story cement structure towers above the regional hospital. Meanwhile, a patch of trees and snow twenty minutes to the south are all that's left to mark a village swept off decades ago by a tsunami. Three megathrust earthquakes have been recorded by Kamchatka in the past three hundred years. The last, which occurred on November 4, 1952, was magnitude 9.0. It caused a tsunami that killed three thousand people in southern Kamchatka and flooded streets in Hawaii, over 5,000 km away.

Minor quakes occur here every day, but in a place so accustomed to extreme conditions, most thermal and seismic activity passes without comment. A few weeks ago, I arrived at Kamchatka State University, where I take Russian classes, and found the professors in the International Office studying their water glasses with raised eyebrows. "Did you feel the earthquake just now?" one asked me. "Everything on our desks shook."

I screamed with frustration. "I missed it! I can't believe I missed it!" I said.

"You usually don't feel them if you're walking," my professor said lightly. "Don't worry. They happen here all the time." Later, I'd read that the morning's quake had a magnitude of 5.1. Before I left New York this summer, the city felt tremors from a 5.8 quake, and people evacuated from buildings and called their loved ones. In Petropavlovsk, my professor gathered her textbooks and mentioned, as she walked toward our classroom, the couple truly serious earthquakes she'd felt before. Kamchatka keeps presenting these contrasts; it's a land of ancient settlement and constant threat, razed villages and new construction, fire and ice.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/12/09/cohabiting-with-natural-disaster-a34716