

Departure

By [Julia Phillips](#)

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My first month in Petropavlovsk, I asked all the people I met if they liked living here. They pursed their lips. "That's a complicated question," they said. Kamchatka seems all at once like a land so beautiful it demands your eternal devotion and like an almost impossible place to survive. Here, the sky is golden-pink, air crisp, water thermal. Meanwhile, electricity shuts off, storms move in, roads crack open. Many residents recounted their stories of a handful of years studying or working in Moscow or St. Petersburg, and then a return to this home — "I had to," they said, "I belong here." Existence is easier elsewhere, but it makes a poor substitute for life here.

What is it about this place that is so hypnotizing? Recently, I spoke to a woman who moved from Moscow to work for a few years in a Kamchatkan nature reserve. Arriving on the peninsula, she said, felt like coming home. "Whenever I visit a spot on Kamchatka where I've never been before, it looks somehow familiar to me," she said. "My heart is here. It always was. I won't spend my whole life working for this reserve, because everything — my parents, daughter, dog, apartment — is still in western Russia. And I've got to go back eventually. I want to go back, of course." She trailed off and took a breath. "But every time I

close my eyes, no matter where I am, even if I'm lying on the beach in Sochi and surrounded by my family, I'll see these volcanoes."

Only a few months into my own move, I can picture those same volcanic visions. On Monday, I fly home for the winter holidays. The trip from Petropavlovsk back to New York will span ten thousand miles and forty hours; I am jittery with excitement, anxious to see loved ones, and dry-mouthed with desire to speak my native language. Still, I know that I will get off the plane on U.S. soil and feel the sharp, immediate tug to return to Kamchatka.

This place gets a hold on you. It fosters a messy love. You're here but you want to be there, then you're there but you want to be here. I started packing for my trip already. Friends come over and look down at my open suitcase. "Put me in there," some joke, "and take me with you." I ask them if they really want to go. Staring down, everyone answers differently. "Yes. Are you inviting me? Yes!" Or, "Maybe." One boy said, "No ... I went to Vladivostok last year with my family, and it was great, it was, it was civilization. But when we landed here, I stepped onto the tarmac and felt like I was breathing for the first time since we'd left. So, no." The suitcase lies between us half-empty. Snapshots from local nature preserves dot the dormitory walls. We are all in different stages of Kamchatka-love, complex, consuming, unending.

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