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From One Extreme to Another

By Julia Phillips

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There are a fair number of people who have traveled to Kamchatka or Alaska. There are few who have reached the Aleutian Islands, and fewer still who have passed months with nomadic reindeer herders or biked 1,200 kilometers from Anchorage to Haines, but in one season last year, Linda Bortoletto did all of that — and more. By foot, plane, boat, and bicycle, the French adventurer spent four months traversing the lands around the Bering Strait. She emerged from her trip with an understanding of places most of us have never seen or even imagined.

Last April, Bortoletto visited Kamchatka to begin planning her journey. When she told the people she met here that she'd never been to Russia before, they were shocked. "First time in Russia and you're going to Kamchatka!" she remembers them saying. "You are crazy!" Bortoletto had originally hoped to hike alone in northern Kamchatka for two months, but after consulting with local scientists, she realized that the peninsula's wildlife posed too big a threat to a solo traveler. She could find no Russian guide willing to accompany her on a 600-kilometer hike: "It was too far, too long, and too dangerous," she said. Finally, she found a group of Chukchi reindeer herders based in the village of Achaivayam who would be following their migrating animals along part of her planned itinerary. The group welcomed

her to join them on a trip through the tundra.

During her time with the group, Bortoletto became immersed in indigenous Chukchi culture. She, eight herders, two cooks, and 2,000 reindeer seemed alone in a landscape ringed by rivers and mountains. Most of the time, she stayed with a day team of herders that left camp at eight in the morning and came back at eight or nine at night. Her best memory of the journey comes from one of these moments spent alongside the herder team:

"The first time we saw the Bering Sea was really amazing. It looked like a lake surrounded by mountains. The reindeer were not walking anymore—they were running, carried by their excitement, and so we were running behind them. Before the reindeer could go drink this saltwater, the Chukchi gathered them in a circle and lassoed two big ones for us to eat. A series of traditions were carried out in honor of the sea, which the Chukchi were seeing for the first time that year. It was a really important instant for them. Once the sacrifices were completed, the reindeer ran up toward the sea, shouting and jumping for joy. I had the impression that I was no longer seeing animals, but children going into raptures in front of an object of their dreams...."

From Kamchatka, Bortoletto flew to Alaska (via Vladivostok, Seoul, and Seattle). She spent three weeks on Atka Island before returning to mainland Alaska and biking from Anchorage to Haines. Her astounding photographs and videos from these places can be found on her website.

Bortoletto's trip crossed two continents, but when she reflects on her adventure, she thinks of the place it started. "The first time I set foot on Kamchatka, I felt its energy and I knew I was making a good choice," she said. Her trip, which for most of us would be the journey of a lifetime, is over, but her travels through Kamchatka and Russia have just begun.

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