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Cost of Living

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Let's talk about money. Really, let's admit that we've always been talking about money, even when the subject might have seemed to be something else: the roads that crack open and disappear, for example, or the five-story buildings patched with metal sheets. The streets left uncleared after each blizzard. The prices of plane tickets teetering into absurdity. In the city, girders of new shopping centers are erected alongside the cement husks of abandoned factories. In the suburbs, "home for sale" notices are spray-painted in letters a meter high. In the north, shacks slapped together by developers grow spongy with black mold. Kamchatka's population keeps deflating like a tire with a slow leak. This landscape is shaped as much by the flow of cash as it is by lava.

Last year, the average salary in Kamchatka came to nearly 35,000 rubles per month. Compared to the rest of the country, this region comes out well; Yugra, which produces most of the country's oil, was Russia's richest region last year with an average monthly salary of 45,000 rubles, while Dagestan stuttered into last place with 8,000 rubles. Even Moscow's average barely exceeded that of Kamchatka. Relatively high salaries have been instituted to compensate for the peninsula's remoteness — during the Soviet era, salaries on Kamchatka

were twice as high as those on the mainland. People came here then to make their fortunes.

Where are those fortunes now? Money, too much money, is trapped in objects here. Food is marked up to a ludicrous degree. On an online forum discussing all things Kamchatka, 16 pages are dedicated to the cost of groceries; forum members track the rising prices of a liter of this or a kilogram of that. "Potatoes are 30-40 rubles," someone writes. "Carrots are 40-80. Cabbage is 35." Forum visitors from other parts of Russia stop by to compare their own markets: "Potatoes and carrots 18-25. Cabbage 15," someone posts from Krasnodar. Food is consistently more expensive here. You could argue that this price-doubling is the cost of peninsula life, that it reflects goods' import cost — but then, the potatoes and carrots are grown locally. Malkinsky mineral water, bottled from Kamchatkan thermal springs, is more expensive on the peninsula than in Vladivostok. Food prices bubble without bursting.

Don't even bring up the cost of clothes. (Adidas sneakers for 8,000 rubles.) And travel! (Flying to Ossora, two hours north of the regional capitol, costs four times as much as a nine-hour flight to Moscow from here.) And tourism...(the Valley of the Geysers shimmering like a mirage in the center of the peninsula because you could never afford to reach it)...and utilities...and gasoline...

What can we say about money? Really, we could talk all day. It comes down to this: there isn't enough. Earthquakes split open the streets and walls, but rubles could patch them. Looking at the gaping sidewalks, the waving price tags, the emptied buildings, you understand—these are just more arguments to add to the conversation we've been having all this time.

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