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Outside Looking In

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Where did you first hear about Kamchatka? In a Cold War-era news report? On a *Risk* game board? From a nature documentary? I myself heard the peninsula's name shouted out a dozen names before I understood what it was: My Russian language professor used to call the back row of our classroom "Kamchatka." Boris Pasternak, in his 1931 memoir *Safe Conduct*, described his schoolteachers using the same term. For ages now, this place has been used as a synonym for distance, isolation and a kind of freezing wonder.

Hearkening to that call, adventurers, photographers and filmmakers from all over the world hurry to Kamchatka's shores. The short narratives they construct about their experiences are disseminated to Britain, Germany, France, Australia, the U.S. and elsewhere. Since landing here in September, I've started watching these clips compulsively. With every twenty-two minutes, I learn more about the greater peninsula and my own place as a foreign visitor.

Passed from local hard drive to hard drive before landing on my own, the episodes all feature sweeping shots out of helicopters. When the stories presented are driven by life here — when the narrative is formed from observation of people, settlements, natural phenomena — the episodes are fascinating. But when they are constructed around the travails of one jittery

foreign host, they grate. Hosts grimace, point, shout. They hold up strips of raw reindeer meat and stick out their tongues in disgust. They creep toward Soviet snowmobiles while stage-whispering doubts about their safety. Still, tired as the host-driven episodes might be, they force us to check our own traveling styles — are we looking to learn or confirm? So I keep collecting these clips. Every one becomes an animated reminder to stay humble, to stay honest.

It's one thing to stand at a distance and say "Kamchatka" as shorthand for a certain short and remote experience. It's another to visit, travel through, and depart from this peninsula still insisting that Kamchatka stands for only these things: geysers, glaciers, and volcanoes; bears; reindeer herders; native dancers; some far-off nuclear humming; decades-old tanks and helicopters. If, when we speak about the sights here, we talk only of such simple expectations, then we might as well have stayed home — we might as well still be in a classroom on the other side of the world, shouting to the back row, calling, "Kamchatka, Kamchatka!"

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