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Goodbye

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People say Kamchatka pulls you back. They share stories from times they moved away, years spent in continental Russia, apartments rented in some more central city — and then, they say, Kamchatka pulled them back. "She tugs," they remark about the peninsula, quietly and with a lot of love.

Earlier this summer, one-way ticket in hand, I boarded a plane leaving Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. Though I don't know exactly how or when, I'm sure that one day I'll return, because even as we lifted off I felt a line tighten from my ribcage through the cabin down to the wet green ground: there it goes, there it is, the gentle, constant feeling of Kamchatka pulling me back.

What is it about this strip of land that's so magnetic? What has drawn waves of 17th-century explorers, 18th-century Cossacks, 20th-century submariners, and contemporary documentary film crews to a place sparsely populated and difficult to reach? Why do all the fish keep arriving year after year? Why does the earth here seem packed over all the concentrated energy in existence?

What is it about Kamchatka that pulls us back?

Over the past year, I'd raise my voice in a bakery, library, bus or club and the locals around me would stop to squint. "Where are you from, if it's not a secret?" someone would ask, adding afterwards: "And why did you come here?" Getting to Petropavlovsk is so tedious — a nine-hour direct flight from Moscow, with an eight-hour time difference from that city, on a ticket pricier than one to New York — that making the trip might indicate a kind of insanity.

But once you've seen pictures of Kamchatka, how could you not come? "I'm here for the nature," I usually answered — "The nature, and the people."

Everything is beautiful here and everyone is kind. I know — any happy tourist will say the same thing about whatever latest place he's fallen in love with; this exact plain review will be given about Iceland, Morocco, New Zealand or New Guinea. Everything is beautiful! Everyone is kind! Even so, I have to insist on this to you in just the way I repeated it to strangers at bus stops all year: Kamchatka's nature is the most beautiful, its people the most kind. It's the truth.

The nature part is easy to prove. Haven't you seen those pictures? The black sand at the ocean shore, the rivers frothing with springtime salmon, the snow-covered volcanoes, the steaming ground. The reindeer, the wolverines, the brown bears, the eagles. The eruptions and the earthquakes. Having caught the pictures, didn't you immediately push this peninsula to the top of your "places to go" list? You see now that Kamchatka is the most beautiful place in the world. You tell yourself you have to visit.

And while you believe your own eyes regarding the nature here, believe me regarding the people: they are welcoming, generous, open, good. They are patient with your limited vocabulary. They smile and take their time. At any point, linguistic, cultural, or interpersonal, that becomes complicated, they make you a careful explanation. They call. They visit. They extend invitations. When you're hungry, they'll make you food; if you don't have the right shoes, they'll lend you a pair. When, fresh off an airplane, you're too exhausted to go about building a life for yourself, they will step in and build one for you. They will become your friends. They will become your family. Trust me: Kamchatka has the kindest people in the world. After meeting them, you'll tell yourself you have to stay.

Kamchatka's nature brings you here and its people will pull you back.

On this blog, most of my posts have been about the nature side of things. It's easier to illustrate beauty with a photograph than kindness; it's more convincing to write about figures than friendship. Of course, the facts about Kamchatka are nothing to shrug off — this place is unique for a thousand reasons geographic, social, and political. There is enough concrete material on this peninsula for many more posts than I produced. Still, I would be remiss not to write at least once about something immeasurable and intangible: that tug. People talk about it. We all know it exists. Ancient, strong, and unrelenting, something about this place keeps pulling us back. I think it's the relationships here that do it, but others argue it's the wildlife, landscapes, or fresh, clean air. Whatever it is, it's magical. Countries away, I still feel the line extending to Kamchatkan earth as taut as it ever was in the airplane cabin. I said goodbye to Kamchatka — and then that line out of my heart tugged, tugged, and I knew that what I was really saying was goodbye for now.

Goodbye to Kamchatka, warm meals, fresh caviar, snowmobiles, backpacking, and bear cubs at a few meters' distance. Goodbye to the Russian language, hello to English. Goodbye to you, reader — thank you for following this blog. Goodbye for now.

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