

The Russian Far East - Jewel of the Russian Far East
From Petropavlovsk Kamchatskiy to Anadyr
21 July to 4 August '09



Heritage Expeditions

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Day 1

Wednesday, 22 July 2009

Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy

Departure day; with passengers boarding the vessel for a 4:30 p.m. departure, we sailed through Petropavlovsk's renowned Avacha Bay and into open ocean, heading north up the Kamchatka coast. After dinner Rodney held an introductory meeting in the lecture room. A warm, sunny day ended with cloud cover at sea.

Day 2

Thursday, 23 July 2009

Zhupanova River

Heavy overcast skies were to dominate this day. In the early morning we set out in Zodiacs to visit the small fishing village at the mouth of the Zhupanova River. Meeting our guide Ilya we worked our way up river into a region of lush hanging garden vegetation searching for Stellar Sea Eagles and 'medvyed'-bears. In a small channel Dennis and Ilya noticed some movement in the tall grass along the shore. It was not long before a moderately large male brown bear dipped his head down to the river and into our view. It was a brief encounter and no pictures were taken. Further up, where the river coalesces into a single wide channel, we were to observe two Sea eagles flying over head. Muskrats and several other bird species were observed under Aleks' tutelage, and back in the open estuary near the village Leo observed an eagle nest. In the village we were to enjoy the hospitality of the lady and daughter who run the stolovaya (dinning room), having salmon and tea as a welcome meal. Kelly was able to locate the litter of 6 one month old puppies in the village and several passengers coalesced around a charmingly familiar canine-human scene. Kelly had thoughts of putting some puppies in her pocket as souvenirs but, in the final analysis, thought the better of it. Dennis took them instead and was to reluctantly leave them on a nest of fishing ropes. Back at the ship, the afternoon was occupied with Aleks' lecture on the birds of the region. This lecture features more than 100 species of birds and is always well received for its beauty and authority. By evening we were setting sail into the eastern horizon in search of the Kommondorsky Ostrova, our voyage's next anticipated venue.

Day 3

Friday, 24 July 2009

Commander Islands, Nikolskoya village

We arrived this morning at Nikolskoya village and established our presence with the local authorities. "Sheol dozhd"- it was raining as we landed and set out along the beach road into the village. The museum was the centre of our interests as we observed the historical dioramas and purchased various mementos. Some passengers visited the local stores well camouflaged in the old soviet concrete blocks. At noon we were on our way down the coast toward the south cape. We picked up ethno-botanist Lisa Strecker who accompanied us for several days on our voyage. In the afternoon a Zodiac cruise followed the steep escarpments in layered sedimentary rocks along the coast, searching with great success for sea bird nests, sea otter and blue fox. The most prevalent birds in the sea cliffs were Brunnichs guillemots, common Murres and Kittewakes. The late evening was spent with a landing at Bering's grave. This very eventful day ended near midnight.

Day 4

Saturday, 25 July 2009

Commander Islands, Medney Island

This day was occupied exploring the north coast of Medney Island in the region of Peschanaya Bugt. We landed with Zodiacs on the sand beach that divides the impressive walls of the coast's escarpments. South of the bay, at least some of the rock appeared to be layered sediments. The



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area shows signs of extensive glaciation with beautiful cirque basins ending abruptly in hanging valleys above the sheer coastal cliffs. Dennis found a fox den along the shore which contained one pup. Kellie was able to make an intimate acquaintance with this pup. The area has many sea otters, seals and bird species, including the Pigeon Guillemot. After a brief return to the ship several people set out again up the coast into a region of sea stacks, grottos and escarpments, a landscape of extraordinary formal and textural beauty.

Back at the ship Lisa gave an afternoon lecture on her favourite topic, ethno-botany. She showed her audience several specimens of plants used by the human culture of this island group.

In the evening Dennis gave a reading from his new book of poetry.

Day 5

Sunday, 26 July 2009

Ukinskaya Guba

We were at sea today sailing from Medney Island to Ukinskaya Guba on the Kamchatka Peninsula. Mo gave a morning lecture on the structure of the earth, focusing on the causes of volcanism. He brought several physical samples to his lecture showing a wide variety of rocks to be found in the region. In the afternoon Dennis gave a lecture on exploration, tracing his own life from the Brooks Range to East Greenland. In the evening we sailed into the fishing village on the west side of Ukinskaya Bay. A local guide led us up the estuary into a tangle of shallows that finally led to a useable river channel which we followed to a late hour of the evening. Many dead salmon were observed on our journey. Local fishermen said that this was the result of high density crowding in the river. We returned to the ship quite late.

Day 6

Monday, 27 July 2009

Karaginsky Island, Verkhoturova Island

Today began with fog and cloud cover. We found ourselves anchored off the Northeast coast of Karaginsky Island. A morning landing took us to a long arching beach beneath moderately steep mountain slopes composed of mixed igneous extrusive and intrusive rocks. Several landslides in serpentine and other rocks were noted - these were perhaps not suitable slopes for bird nesting as few birds were seen. The long walk south down the beach passed cliffs of finely layered mudstone, containing fossil plant remains, and ended at the mouth of a meandering salmon rich river. This large island was not rich in bird life, although some sea mammals were observed along its shores. In the evening we arrived at Verkhoturova Island which, although much smaller than Karaginsky, is rich in wildlife. Its southern cliffs housed bird populations of extraordinary density, puffins, guillemots and many other species. Sailing around the natural arched sea stack of its south cape we were soon to come upon a group of outlying rocks that held sea lions. We approached these rocks with caution and eventually groups of sea lions were swimming curiously around our boats. We continued up the west coast to the spit of sand that forms the northern cape. Here a fine beach led to a green plateau with a grave site and an old lighthouse. A sublime three dimensional mountain landscape rose behind the lighthouse. We sat on the plateau near the cross to observe this as the sun was setting behind the broken clouds. We returned to the ship at ten in the evening to enjoy tea and commentary on the beauties of Verkhoturova, another one of the world's most fascinating islands.



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Day 7

Tuesday, 28 July 2009

Koryaksky Reserve, Cape Chechnyi

Anchored off the west coast of the Goven Peninsula near Cape Chechnyi we made a landing at the ranger's camp that is situated to observe and protect the bear population. The rangers took us on a walking tour along the river behind the camp. Several bears appeared in the flat river bottom lands and we were able to observe bear social behaviour from our safe position above the river. Another walk took us across many grassy beach ridges to the shores of a large lake. It was interesting to see that different plants grew on the gravel ridges compared with those in the damper swales between. At the conclusion of this walk we said goodbye to Lisa Strecker, who will remain in the Goven area for some weeks. Sailing down the coast to Cape Conspicuous we set out again in zodiacs to visit a derelict fishing vessel that is being used as a nesting site by gulls. Local authorities appeared in government zodiacs to check our permits. We sailed further down this coast, past conspicuously striped sandstone and mudstone cliffs, to a beach at the mouth of a small salmon river. Upon walking to the top of the beach, we observed a young bear near the river. The wind was behind us and she quickly withdrew and moved up into some brush on a plateau. We set out beneath this plateau and found a fine viewing place above the river flats. A bear was quickly seen below us fishing successfully in the river. We decided to spend the afternoon at this view point, admiring the landscape, and waiting for more bears to appear. After a pleasant few hours, another bear emerged ascending the river below us, possibly the bear we had seen when we first arrived. She was fishing with considerable enthusiasm and some success and the photographers among us were thrilled to be able to shoot her activities in the river. As she continued up river we at last decided to leave our perch and return to the ship for dinner. This was a memorable bear day for all concerned.

Day 8

Wednesday, 29 July 2009

Tintikun Lagoon

Early this morning we sailed with Zodiacs into Tintikun Lagoon. Because of shallows in the river, the boats were unloaded and we walked upstream past slate outcrops to rejoin the boats. A striking alpine landscape unfolded above the lagoon. A brown bear was seen silhouetted on a ridge above us. A spectacular display of sandstone peaks loomed over the landward horizons with one small glacier evident in a cirque. Landing at the head of the lagoon we waded in the salmon stream feeding the lagoon. Simon made great efforts to catch a fish with some success... ..at amusing his audience. Retreating back toward the sea we greeted the zodiac rangers we had met the day before and found a young bear running along the shoreline. In the afternoon Aleks gave another authoritative lecture, this time on marine mammals, finishing off with one of his favourites - the adorable sea otter. Birthday cakes for Jane and Barbara appeared miraculously at dinner. This was a satisfying day for all concerned.

Day 9

Thursday, 30 July 2009

Bukhta Natalia

Fog was to dominate much of the day as we anchored in the Bukhta Natalia region. Sailing into the southern fjord arm of the bukhta, Rodney decided to make a morning landing on the steep shore. The mid summer hill sides were in bloom and many people found themselves walking and lounging in the flowers. As the morning developed the high mountain walls of the fjord began to emerge through the fog. We returned to the ship and sailed back toward the sea to find the deep fog not giving way to the midday sun. Dennis gave a lecture on bears and wolves, discussing the origin of bears in the Miocene and distinguishing between the behaviours of Brown Bears, Polar Bears and wolves. He described several incidents that revealed important information about how to deal



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with bears and outlined a comprehensive strategy for risk management. Later in the afternoon the Herzog film about the life of Tim Treadwell was played. Dennis viewed Treadwell's efforts as misguided but possessing a core of dramatic and philosophical validity
We steamed north on two engines to Chukotka.

Day 10

Friday, 31 July 2009

At Sea

Still at sea, we embarked on a series of lectures dealing with climate in its expanding intellectual markets. Polar Bears were a big item. In the morning Jenny Ross gave the first in a two part series on polar bears. The first lecture offered a general introduction to the bears biology, focusing on the bears geographical distribution. The next lecture in the afternoon examined the effects of climate change on that distribution, painting a pessimistic picture of the bears hopes for survival in the wild. In late afternoon the CNN film, 'Planet in Peril' was shown. This film examines the general biological crisis that is emerging on the planet. In the evening Rodney, Aleks and Dennis gave a summary of the voyage up to the present.

Day 11

Saturday, 1 August 2009

Yttygran Island, Arakamchechen Island

In the fog off Yttygran Island, we made a landing to visit the 'whale bone alley'. Several large whale ribs are propped here to create some kind of totemic formation. Generally this kind of construction in an animist environment finds its original purpose in some sort of 'ritual appeasement' to the natural world. A Thule house remnant was found as well. Its age was estimated to be several hundred years. Dennis had lived in such houses in his youth and explained something of the life style involved with such architecture. In the afternoon we sailed along the east coast of Arakamchechen Island, landed and approached a walrus colony of more than 30 individuals. We observed them at 100 meters but no closer. Despite the grey light some good photos were obtained.

Day 12

Sunday, 2 August 2009

Provideniya

Today we visited the town of Provideniya. Famous for its rusting old Soviet block architecture, we found it spruced up a bit with some new paint. The museum was the central attraction and almost everyone ended up there at some point. Igor, the museum's curator, proved to be a very affable and charming fellow, explaining with some eloquence almost everything that needed explaining. A wall panel covering 'Whale Bone Alley' set the dates for the site at fourteenth to fifteenth century A.D. This corresponded to our guesses from the day before. Igor said that some earlier dates had now been suggested by new evidence. It is Dennis' view that all these dates may have some validity since so many of these sites display remains that have been recycled through many generations of culture. Back out on the streets, the old orthodox church was open and conducting informal services for a small group of elderly and visibly devout women. A few people went to the cemetery on the other side of town. Jane and Mo determined the local rock type as igneous intrusive. Though biologically greyed on the upper slopes, its real character turned out to be typical light granites. Back on the ship we sailed toward Egvikinot. A few among us started to drink a bit of celebratory excess in anticipation of the imminent conclusion of this voyage. Singing was detected in certain quarters.



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Day 13

Monday, 3 August 2009

Egvekinot

Our last day was spent in Egvekinot in the rain. Walks were taken through the town. After a lunch of fish soup, cold sandwiches, hot drinks and sweet breads, we paid a visit to the local museum. We were given a tour of exhibits that depicted events of the second world war, the gulag period and some nice displays of natural history, as well as geological and archaeological displays. Later in the day we drove up the road that leads to the polar circle. Stopping at the land mark arch at this point we made excursions to the nearby gulag associated houses and noted the glacial remnants in the landscape. A group picture was taken under the polar circle arch. With that we returned to the ship for dinner. Rodney gave a last briefing in the evening with a final formal farewell to those passengers taking their leave of the ship upon our arrival August 4 in Anadyr.

So concludes my log of this voyage. As I had noted earlier, the voyage proved indeed to amount to a small life time with a host of events, the barest outline of which I have included in these writings.

Written by Dennis Schmitt



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