

EASTERN promise

BY BARRY STONE

A land of smouldering volcanoes, steaming geysers and soaring peaks, the Kamchatka Peninsula is a place where salmon spawn, sea eagles soar and bears keep the locals on their toes. This finger of Russia might just be one of the wildest places on Earth.

The volcanic landscape far below our ageing Soviet MI-8 helicopter brings the getting-to-know-you conversations of our group of adventure-seekers to a grinding halt, substituted by gasps and all manner of expletives. Somebody mutters that it is like gazing over a golf course for giants, with vast forests of birch, larch, spruce and meadows its fairways and receding ice sheets – the remnants of a late summer – its sand traps. Above the tree line, snow- and ice-filled ravines scoured by ancient and not-so-ancient lava flows descend from innumerable summits and look like the white stripes on a zebra – at least, that’s how Koert, a Dutch oil executive and vodka expert and one of 16 people in our group, describes it. There are no towns or villages, no ski runs, no agriculture or chimney smoke or roads or other helicopters or anything else suggesting human presence. It is a primordial-looking place: the way

the world must have been before humans started building things; before we got busy.

We are in the Russian Far East, hovering over Kamchatka – a 1,250-kilometre-long peninsula roughly the size of Germany, Austria and Switzerland combined, extending south from Russia towards Japan; the Sea of Okhotsk to its left, the Pacific Ocean on its right. Cossacks first came here centuries ago in search of fur – mostly sable, once known in these parts as “soft gold.” But the peninsula’s overwhelming isolation meant that few real settlements took hold until the province’s capital, Petropavlovsk, was founded in 1740 by Dutch explorer Vitus Bering. From where we are perched, it looks as though Bering never came here at all.

Though a peninsula by definition, Kamchatka might as well be an island, effectively cut off from eastern Siberia by mountain ranges so precipitous and rugged that even the Soviets, with their access to the abundant forced

labour of the gulags, never attempted so much as a road. But the remoteness – the peninsula is some 11,000 kilometres and eight time zones east of the Kremlin – has proven a blessing for wildlife. Half of the world’s population of Steller’s sea eagles are here, and there are reindeer, mink, sable and wolverines. Kamchatka’s streams and rivers, hundreds of them, flow undammed and unpolluted to the sea, which is why scientists estimate that a third of all the salmon found in the Pacific Ocean spawn here and are the foundation of the area’s food chain – more than 130 animal species depend on them for survival, and they provide some of the best fly fishing you’ll ever experience.

The countryside is pockmarked with hundreds of geysers and fumarole fields, including the World Heritage-listed Valley of Geysers, the second-largest concentration of geysers in the world. Eleven percent of the world’s volcanoes are found in Kamchatka, too – of the province’s total 300, 29 are active. They stretch for hundreds of kilometres along two mighty mountain ranges, the Central Range and the Eastern Kamchatka Belt, a tiny portion of which we are attempting to fathom.

Half of Kamchatka’s 400,000 residents live in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, a pleasant, walkable city with a distinctly provincial feel and handsome pre-Soviet timber residences lining hillside streets. The other half are scattered so widely that the peninsula’s population density equates to less than one person per square kilometre. But don’t count on having the vast swathe of land all to yourself: Kamchatka brown bears are scattered here, too – around 16,000 of them, the densest concentration of the sub-species on the

planet. So if your travel insurance has a “physio/remedial massage” option, tick it – I never looked over my shoulder so much in all my life.

When it is time to find a place to land the MI-8 and for everyone to start talking again, we descend on Grassy Point, a tiny promontory on Kurilskoye Lake. The second-largest of its kind on the peninsula, Kurilskoye is also Eurasia’s

“Three strands of wire powered by a solar panel the size of a cheese board didn’t seem to possess the necessary punch to deter a frontal assault by a 700-kilogram bear.”

largest spawning ground for red salmon and, as a result, one gigantic bear magnet – we spot hundreds of the animals crowding around the banks. We also spot a man-made structure – a two-storey A-frame timber lodge able to accommodate 15 or so guests. There’s a dining room below and wrap-a-round verandas to enable guests to enjoy the view: the graceful symmetry of Ilinsky volcano (1,578 metres) and a dozen other “lesser” peaks; bear cubs chasing each



other across open meadows, their parents stalking salmon along the lake’s shore, just beyond the perimeter of our electrified fence. Well, so-called fence.

Installed after Japanese nature photographer Michio Hoshino was mauled and killed by a brown bear on this spot in 1996 – apparently, Hoshino insisted he would be safe sleeping outside in his tent – the fence concerned me. Three strands of wire powered by a solar panel the size of a cheese board didn’t seem to me to possess the necessary punch to deter a frontal assault by a 700-kilogram bear – and his friends. Alessai, our national parks guide, tries to reassure us: “only” one in 100 encounters between bears and humans here goes awry, he says. His shotgun is more comforting.

Grassy Point is home for Alessai, and we never step beyond the fenceline without him. He, in turn, never goes anywhere without his shotgun and cache of soft-lead slugs – you can’t be too careful in an environment where bears outnumber rabbits, and where getting about involves walking along fresh bear trails through metre-high grasses.

An African safari it isn’t – there are no jeeps or stretched Land Rovers here. In Kamchatka, you walk to your wildlife, or stop and let it come to you. Either way, you have plenty of time to say your prayers.

Early on day four, our dependable MI-8 returns to take us from bear country to a 1,000-metre base camp near one of Kamchatka’s most restless giants: Gorely volcano. At 1,829 metres high, Gorely is a geological jigsaw, a massive complex of five overlapping stratovolcanoes with 11 summit craters and another 30 on its flanks.

The trek to the summit is easy and requires no alpine gear,



CHOPPER AND CHANGE

Clockwise from above: A MI-8 helicopter on the shore of Schtubelya crater lake inside Ksudach volcano; trekking to Gorely’s 1,829-metre summit; Gorely volcano’s crater lake appeared after a series of eruptions in 1986.

Previous spread: A brown bear chasing its lunch.

“Once you reach the rim, there’s a final, nerve-jangling walk along an impossibly narrow ridgeline linking two of Gorely’s craters, one home to a turquoise lake of sulphuric acid.”



PEAK PERFORMANCE

The quintessential Kamchatka: endless meadows of wildflowers, volcanoes and rivers.

Opposite: Gorely’s crater lake.



travel facts

GETTING THERE

Jetstar flies daily to Tokyo from most Australian cities via the Gold Coast or Cairns. 131-538; jetstar.com/au

Japan Airlines also flies direct from Sydney and the Gold Coast to Tokyo, and from Melbourne to Tokyo via Singapore. 1800-80-2228; jal.com

From Tokyo, Vladivostok Air offers connections on to Petropavlovsk and will soon offer flights to Alaska. vladivostokair.us

GETTING AROUND

50 Degrees North offers a 10-day “Bears & Volcanoes of Kamchatka” tour around the Kamchatka Peninsula including accommodation and helicopter excursions. 1300-422-821; fiftydegreesnorth.com

WHEN TO GO

To be assured of bear sightings, visit the peninsula between June and September.

WHERE TO STAY

Don’t come to Kamchatka expecting luxurious resorts. The Petropavlovsk Hotel offers basic rooms as well as a restaurant and spa. 74-152/252-525 petropavlovsk-hotel.ru

FURTHER INFORMATION

The Embassy of the Russian Federation has more information on visas, accommodation, tours and activities. australia.mid.ru

the five-hour walk taking you up around 750 metres over ice, scree and some sharply incised fields of volcanic rock. Once you reach the rim, there’s a final, nerve-jangling walk along an impossibly narrow ridgeline linking two of Gorely’s spectacular craters – one home to a breathtaking turquoise lake of sulphuric acid, the other an amphitheatre of near-vertical rock walls pockmarked with steam vents that scream louder than a 747 taking off.

Kamchatka’s interior has only a few hundred kilometres of paved roads, hence the popularity of Petropavlovk’s fleet of exhilarating MI-8 transport helicopters, a necessary conveyance for all serious bear and volcano voyeurs. The choppers rattle and are incessantly noisy; the gauges are analogue; various rods and control wires run along the inside of their fuselages; and no one cares if you don’t wear your seat belt. But their Russian pilots can land you on a rouble – or, in our case, on a rock the size of a car space inside the smouldering, sulphurous caldera of Mutnovsky volcano.

What with the bears and the lack of roads – not to mention the fact that Petropavlovsk, a major base for Russia’s Pacific Fleet, was not even open to most locals until early 1989 and to foreigners until 1990 – Kamchatka doesn’t really lend itself to independent travel. But this isn’t a bad thing.

The end-of-world landscapes and big silences that come with true isolation are a rare and special thing – as is the knowledge that you’re taking the (high, grassy) pass less travelled. •

Photography by Barry Stone.

TITANIC- lovers' guide to belfast

BY ROBERT LA BUA

Near, far, wherever you are – in 2012, expect to hear a lot more about Northern Ireland's most legendary export as commemorations for the Titanic approach.

You've heard by now what the Irish say about the ill-fated *Titanic*: "It was just fine when it left." When it left Belfast, that is – the place where the legendary ship was built, and the focus of this year's commemoration of the vessel's demise a century ago on April 15. A hundred years may have passed but the truths and myths surrounding the RMS *Titanic* and its sinking still captivate our imaginations.

Unlike the ship, Belfast has resurfaced on the tourism sea as an appealing destination offering a surprising diversity of attractions. The city centre is easy to navigate and the newly reinvigorated Titanic Quarter is packed with things to do and see, including a spectacular museum with displays and presentations on all things *Titanic*.

WHAT TO DO

Ever determined to educate herself to a standard befitting a millionaire's wife, *Titanic* passenger Margaret Brown – better known

to the world today as "the unsinkable Molly Brown" – would be happy to see so many cultural experiences on offer in Belfast. In anticipation of the upcoming centennial commemorations, the old Harland and Wolff Shipyard and its vicinity have been cleaned up and renamed the Titanic Quarter. The simple slipway from which *Titanic* was launched at first seems unimpressive – just a very large slab of concrete flecked with yellow. Oh, wait – those aren't specks, they're life-sized statues of men, meant to illustrate just how deep, how massive in scale the slipway is.

Nearby, housed in an extraordinary building scheduled to open just days before the anniversary of the ship's sinking, the Titanic Belfast museum will showcase a huge array of memorabilia. The museum is the culmination of an ongoing makeover to this part of the city. For step-by-step insights, book yourself on one of Titanic Walking Tours' excursions – they offer a myriad of interesting tidbits about the history of the ship.



THAT SINKING FEELING

The shipyards at the Titanic Quarter, promoting their most famous export.

Opposite: The buildings at Queens University date back more than 160 years.

Previous spread: On the grounds of the 19th-century Belfast Castle.



Not all Belfast's appeal is related to the *Titanic*. On the city's northern edge sits Belfast Castle, a fine building occupying beautiful gardens with water views. On its southern fringe are the impressive grounds of Queen's University, the main venue for the annual Belfast Festival at Queen's, Ireland's largest arts festival. In between are many appealing places to visit, including the Linen Hall Library. Opposite the historic corridors of Belfast City Hall, the library is a great place to take in some culture: the latest art exhibitions, readings and other events, most of them free.

Despite the melancholy reasons for their existence, the poignant political murals in the city's Shankill district are not to be missed. Arguably one of the city's most moving attractions, the murals adorn the walls of residential and commercial buildings on several streets in the neighbourhood.

The most comfortable and convenient way to check them out is on a private tour with the debonair Hamilton

Lowe of Spectrum Cars, who offers city tours all around Belfast as well as day trips to County Antrim's gorgeous Causeway Coast to see the Giant's Causeway – a series of 40,000 interlocking basalt columns and a UNESCO World Heritage site – or farther afield to Derry to visit Ireland's only remaining fully intact walled city – one of the best preserved of its kind in Europe.

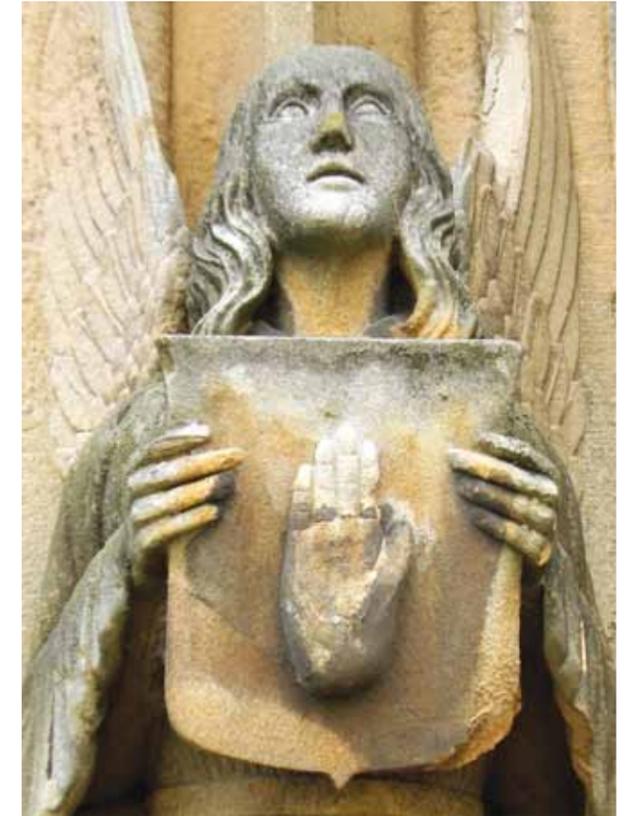
For evenings out, there is no shortage of entertainment. The Irish are ardent supporters of live theatre and other performing arts. The recently refurbished Ulster Hall is Belfast's premier venue for small-scale recitals, concerts and shows, while the Grand Opera House is the venue for larger performances. In the Titanic Quarter, the eye-catching Odyssey Arena hosts regular rock and pop concerts and sports matches, is home to a popular pavilion for eating, drinking and clubbing, and is also the site of the outstanding W5 science centre.

WHERE TO SLEEP

Titanic's first-class passengers, including real estate magnate John Jacob Astor, would have enjoyed The Merchant Hotel's opulent interiors and attentive service. The Merchant, occupying the ornate former headquarters of Ulster Bank, offers lavish guestrooms, rich in architectural detail; a recent addition provides more contemporary accommodations, also with five-star service. The Merchant's Rolls-Royce Phantom is available for airport transfers and city tours. Even if you're not staying here, come for dinner under The Great Room's ornate dome.

Less than 11 kilometres from the centre of Belfast, in the leafy Holywood neighbourhood facing Belfast Lough, is the impressive Culloden Estate & Spa. The former manor of the Bishops of Down, the palatial residence sits atop a small hill, giving it commanding views over nearly five hectares of rolling lawns and gardens to the atmospheric Cultra Inn restaurant, at the other end of the property.

Belfast Malmaison offers rooms in self-proclaimed "bordello style" and does a roaring trade with London hens and bucks in town for weekend parties. After all, how many three-star hotels offer a suite with a billiard table of its own? A convenient city-centre location puts most Belfast attractions within walking distance – handy for getting home after a night out eating, drinking and partying.



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The Fitzwilliam's location on the west side of Belfast puts it on the same block as the Grand Opera House. The property epitomises modern city living, bringing a pared-down urban sophistication to the city's hotel scene in the form of functional, comfortable rooms done up in stylish colours with a touch of design whimsy.

WHERE TO EAT

Following the lead of major cities across northern Europe, Belfast's dining scene has undergone an extraordinary transformation in recent years. With several successful establishments, Michael Deane has built quite the culinary empire for himself in the Northern Irish capital – his citywide establishments include Deanes Seafood Bar, Simply Deanes and Deanes at Queens. His restaurant on Howard Street, simply named Deanes, has a Michelin star and serves up fare focused on local ingredients including Kettle Irish lamb, Strangford scallops and Sainte-Maure goats' cheese.

Craving fish and chips? Head to Mourne Seafood Bar, a well-loved eatery serving fish dishes in a traditional bistro atmosphere, suitably upscaled for today's restaurant patrons. There's seafood chowder and pan-fried crab claws as well as all manner of oysters, best enjoyed in the new Oyster Bar.

Despite the fame of the *Titanic's* wealthy passengers, the vast majority of guests on the ship were travelling in second and third class; among them was the only Australian woman to survive the disaster, a ship stewardess named Evelyn Marsden. Even back in Marsden's day, business was brisk at St George's Market – Belfast's biggest food hall – overflowing with stalls

“The old Harland and Wolff Shipyard has been cleaned up and renamed the Titanic Quarter, home to a new museum showcasing a huge amount of memorabilia.”

selling fresh bread, cheeses and other deli-style goods. Equally casual is the Bobbin Coffee Shop in Belfast City Hall, which offers free exhibits with its café lattes and scones.

WHERE TO SHOP

As it has done with accommodation and cuisine, Belfast has raised the bar on shopping experiences in recent years. Even *Titanic* survivor Lady Lucy Duff-Gordon, a leading fashion designer at the beginning of the 20th century, would be pleased to have her expensive creations sold in today's upscale Belfast boutiques, including Envoy of Belfast, stocked with clothes from hard-to-find couturiers, and British stalwart the House of Fraser department store, located in the Victoria Square shopping centre. Homewares hounds will enjoy browsing the merchandise at Equinox, one of the best stores of its kind in the United Kingdom.



BELFAST BEAUTY

Belfast's centre is dominated by the newly refurbished City Hall.

Next spread, from top: Outside Ulster Hall; Belfast's new Titanic Quarter at night.

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Custom jewellery makes a somewhat unexpected souvenir, and goes well beyond the traditional Claddagh ring; The Steensons take their decades of jewellery-design experience and create beautiful bespoke pieces. The Steensons' city location on Bedford Street is just behind Belfast City Hall, but their workshop is in picturesque Glenarm in County Antrim, a leisurely drive from the city. Emeralds from the Emerald Isle, or perhaps a replica of famed blue diamond necklace the Heart of the Ocean?

Though the Heart of the Ocean in 1997's film *Titanic* was fictional, its basis is not: among the passengers on the ill-fated ship was successful married businessman Samuel Morley, who was travelling with his new paramour, Kate Florence Phillips. Allegedly, Morley presented Philips with a blue sapphire necklace as a gift of love, and it was this romance that served as the inspiration for the blockbuster film's love story.

Let's face it: who wouldn't want a replica as a Belfast souvenir? •

Photography by Robert La Bua and courtesy of Donal McCann
Photography for Titanic Belfast.

travel facts

GETTING THERE

Emirates has just added Dublin to its flight network, offering travellers from Australia a one-stop service to Dublin Airport. Belfast is approximately two hours' drive north of Dublin and regular buses travel direct from the airport to Belfast city centre. 1300-303-777; emirates.com

GETTING AROUND

Walking is a pleasure in Belfast's compact city centre. Titanic Walking Tours offers insightful excursions with a *Titanic* theme. 44-75/4648-9875; titanicwalk.com

Spectrum Cars is the leading private transport operator in Belfast. The company provides luxury airport transfers (including from Dublin) as well as transport and tours around Belfast and throughout Northern Ireland. 44-28/9336-7151; spectrum-cars.com

Globus organises guided tours around Ireland, including Belfast. 1300-130-134; globus.com.au

WHEN TO GO

Despite the allure of long days over the Irish summer, the other seasons offer plenty of attractions, with many cultural, sporting and culinary events taking place throughout the year. The city will host a number of special events in 2012 to commemorate the centennial of the sinking of the *Titanic* including Mayo Titanic Cultural Week, a range of events set to take place from April 8.

WHERE TO STAY

- Belfast Malmaison, 44-28/9022-0200; malmaison.com/hotels/belfast
- Culloden Estate & Spa. 44-28/9042-1066; hastingshotels.com/culloden-estate-and-spa
- The Fitzwilliam, 44-28/9044-2080; fitzwilliamhotelbelfast.com
- The Merchant Hotel. 44-28/9023-4888; themerchanthotel.com

WHERE TO EAT

- Deanes. 36-40 Howard St.; 44-28/9033-1134; michaeldeane.co.uk
- The Great Room Restaurant. 16 Skipper St.; 44-28/9023-4888; themerchanthotel.com
- St George's Market, 12-20 East Bridge St.; 44-28/9043-5704; belfastcity.gov.uk/stgeorgesmarket
- Mourne Seafood Bar Belfast. 34-36 Bank St.; 44-28/9024-8544; mourneseafood.com

WHERE TO SHOP

- Envoy of Belfast. 4 Wellington St.; 44-28/9031-1110; envoyofbelfast.com
- Equinox. 32 Howard St.; 44-28/9023-0089; equinoxshop.com
- House of Fraser. Victoria Square; 44/844-800-3705; houseoffraser.co.uk/belfast
- The Steensons. Bedford St.; 44-28/9024-8269; thesteensons.com

FURTHER INFORMATION

For additional tips on visiting Ireland, contact:

- Tourism Ireland. 61-2/9964-6900; discoverireland.com.au
- Northern Ireland Tourist Board. 44-28/9023-1221; discovernorthernireland.com
- Diageo Belfast Visitor & Convention Bureau. 44-28/9024-6609; gotobelfast.com
- Titanic Belfast. 44-28/9076-6399; titanicbelfast.com



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