

BEYOND SIBERIA - RUSSIA'S WILD FAR EAST

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The final Travellers Club meeting for 2014 attracted an unexpectedly large number of participants, so much so that even with the addition of extra seating it was standing room only for about half a dozen of those present. The topic was Russia's Far East, which is perhaps the least known part of the world's largest country.

Stephen began his lecture by clearing up a common misconception, noting that the entire eastern part of Russia is not synonymous with 'Siberia' as many think. Siberia is the vast area centred on Novosibirsk and Irkutsk, and it does not include the huge region to the east, known as the Russian Far East Federal District. With an area of 6.2 million square kilometres, the Russian Far East is 81% of the size of Australia. The talk focussed on several key facets of the Russian Far East - its elegant cities, the remnants of its sordid history (especially the gulags), its communist legacy, the abandoned towns, the impact of mining and the spectacular geothermal landscapes of the Kamchatka Peninsula.



Most parts of the Russian Far East were closed to foreigners during the Soviet era, and have only opened up to non-Russians in the past few years. The talk therefore revealed an intriguing world that few outsiders apart from a handful of spies ever knew existed.

The talk began by looking at Vladivostok, the largest city in the Russian Far East. With a latitude similar to that of Hobart, Vladivostok is the most temperate city in the region, although its climate could never be considered as balmy. With its port facilities on Golden Horn Bay and its terminus at the eastern end of the Trans-Siberian Railway, Vladivostok represents a common entry point to the Russian Far East. Despite its eastern longitude, Vladivostok has a strongly European flavour and a marked maritime character, being the home port of the Russian Pacific fleet. Consequently, many of the monuments in Vladivostok are reminders to Vladivostok's naval history, one of the most spectacular examples being the huge S-56 submarine that is located beside the large war memorial near the harbour.

Khabarovsk, to the north, is almost as large as Vladivostok, and shares its European architecture. However, the inland location of Khabarovsk on the Amur River overlooking the Chinese border gives the city a more extreme climate, and the focus of the city is the river rather than the ocean.

Moving still further north to the coastal city of Magadan, we focussed on the 'mainland' of Russian Far East. Magadan is known by some as the 'Gateway to Hell' because it was the administrative centre of the gulag system under Stalin during Soviet times. It was the arrival point for thousands of prisoners who were condemned to work in



the appalling conditions and extreme climate of the Soviet Far East, toiling and often dying in the harsh factories and mines of the region. One of the most evocative monuments in Magadan is the huge 'Mask of Sorrows', built on the city's outskirts as a memorial to those who suffered and perished in the gulags.

The travelogue proceeded north and west of Magadan along the Kolyma Highway, commonly known as the Road of Bones because of the huge number of prisoners who perished during its construction and whose bones became a component of the road's foundations. There were photos of many of the small towns, abandoned factories, and derelict facilities along this bleak road, but several are worthy of special mention here.

Dneprovsky is a former gulag that operated as a tin mining and refining centre from 1941 to 1954. Located off to the side of the Road of Bones, it appears at first like any other abandoned mine until the barbed wire fences, the watchtowers and the prisoners' cemeteries are taken into account.



Susuman appears at first to be like any other typical decaying former Soviet town. However, it has two weird structures of note: the Young Engineers' College that has the front half of an old airliner protruding from its wall, and the old airport terminal building that has been converted into a Russian Orthodox church.

Kadykchan had a population of 10,000 people until an explosion in 1996 forced closure of the gold mine that was the town's *raison d'être*. The town was

formally closed and abandoned in 2003, although a few illegal squatters did not leave until 2007. Now the entire empty town is lying open and derelict, enabling anyone interested to explore the inside and outside of every building. The photos highlighted the post-apocalyptic atmosphere of the town, with books still strewn across the floor in the high school, 2003 calendars still on the walls of the flats, cheques ready for posting in the administrative office, and the bust of Lenin still standing in front of the Workers' Club building, shot 15 times by the last settlers who abandoned the town in 2007.

With a population of 350,000 people, the city of Yakutsk on the River Lena marks the western end of the 2031 kilometre Road of Bones. One of the world's most isolated cities, Yakutsk has an extreme annual temperature range from -70°C in winter to 40°C in summer. Built on permafrost, many of the city's water and gas pipes have been built above ground. Warming temperatures are affecting the permafrost, causing many of the city's older wooden buildings to slump and, in some cases, collapse. It is possible to go underground in Yakutsk and be surrounded by the permafrost, an experience that even enables the visitor to see a preserved mammoth head.

The final stop on the 'mainland' section of Russia's Far East was Mirny, still one of the largest diamond mining centres in the world. Essentially a 'company town', where almost everything seems to be owned, controlled or



operated by Alrosa, Mirny's main claim to fame is that it has the world's second deepest hole in the ground. With a depth of 525 metres and a diameter at the top of over one kilometre, Mirny's big hole is the open-cut diamond mine that produced much of the region's wealth until it was replaced by the current conventional mine that opened a little over a decade ago. Alrosa operates the region's airline, it owns most of the housing, it built the town's church and school, and it even erected the town's statue of Stalin, one of two such statues observed in the Russian Far East (the other being in Yakutsk).

The description of the Russian Far East then moved away from the 'mainland' to the Kamchatka Peninsula, an eastern region of geothermal activity on the Pacific Ring of Fire that has produced a spectacular array of landforms and features.



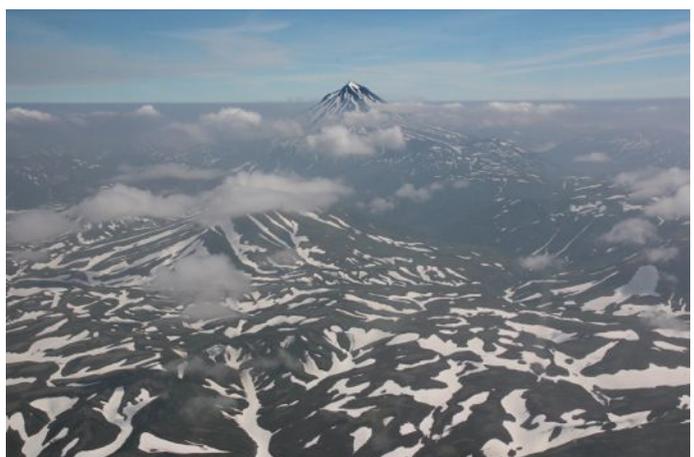
With a population of 180,000 people, the largest city in Kamchatka is Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. Situated on the sides of steep hills overlooking Avacha Bay, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky is a port and administrative centre whose focus is the huge statue of Lenin, now ironically backed by the Gazprom offices.

Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky is a starting point for exploring nearby and more distant geothermal areas, with the focus

especially on Mutnovskaya Volcano, Vachkazhets Peak, Avacha Bay, Karymsky Volcano, Ksudach Caldera, Uzon Caldera, Avachinsky Volcano, Koryaksky Volcano and the small settlement of indigenous Koriyak people near Yelizivo.

Two additional areas, both of which could only be reached by flying in large Soviet-era Mil Mi-8 helicopters, were especially impressive. The first such area was Kuril Lake, located about 200 kilometres south of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. Kuril Lake has a large population of Russian brown bears, and many photos of the area's brown bears - old and young, solo and in groups, all beautiful and impressive, were shown.

The second area was the Valley of Geysers, about 200 kilometres north of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. Although many of the area's geothermal features were destroyed in an earthquake and subsequent landslide in 2007, the Valley of Geysers retains an impressive array of features, including geysers, fumaroles, pools of boiling water, hot springs and mud cauldrons.



Questions from the audience included such diverse aspects such as the practicalities of visiting the Russian Far East, the standard of the hotels, the types of food available, the means of transport, and some first-hand observations on exploring the deserted towns and gulags. As the audience left the lecture room to enjoy afternoon tea, they were farewelled by a selection of Russian music selected by the speaker.