



Diving the Land of Volcanoes

Kamchatka

— *Russia's Mysterious East*

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Bears, steller sea lions and orcas are the real lords of this wild land. PREVIOUS PAGE: When you fly into our dreamland, that is Kamchatka, you see only volcanoes in and around the majestic mountain ridges. It is still a world of untouched wild nature

“Is there diving in Kamchatka?” my buddy asked me while inspecting a map of Russia on Google. It was such an unexpected question, it put me in a stupor. As a Russian dive professional, I certainly should know about all the dive sites and dive centers around the country, but I was stumped with this question about Kamchatka.

The question and the uncertainty got so deeply stuck in my head that the hasty decision to go to the state of Kamchatka and check out the diving there was immediate, and I was determined to make it happen as soon as possible. I decided to investigate everything about Kamchatka and get rid of this annoying

blank in my chest of diving knowledge.

Each more or less erudite traveler I questioned told me that Kamchatka is the land of volcanoes. Of the more than 600 volcanoes on the planet, 160 of them are located on the peninsula of Kamchatka, and 30 of them are active. Volcanoes are even on the flag and emblem of the state of Kamchatka.

Official statistics state that Kamchatka has only about 15 thousand tourists annually, and the majority of them are citizens of the United States, Japan, and other foreign visitors. I was amazed that the percentage of Russians in these numbers was a lot less than half, in comparison to the approximately three million Russian tourists that visited very similar environments in Alaska. All these numbers pushed me to thinking that something was not quite right about my fellow countrymen’s knowledge of Kamchatka.

Most of the travel agencies (operating tours to Kamchatka) offered me hiking or helicopter excursions to the volcanoes, white water rafting on wild rivers, fishing, photo sessions with wild bears, bathing in hot springs and other small pleasures for boring philistines. But in regards to diving on Kamchatka, there were only rare, atypical replies, which brought me big doubts about the professionalism of the operations there.

The Internet—the best friend of divers today—informed me that August was the best season to travel to Kamchatka. We found only one PADI dive center, Orca-Diving, in the town of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. This information wet my appetite and growing desire to dive even more, together with real professionals, on the coast of the mysterious volcanic peninsula.

We booked our flight for March to save money on seasonal airfare increases





Overview (above) of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky—the capitol city of Kamchatka; Anna Butkovskaya, PADI instructor and director of Kamchatka's dive club (inset); Location of the state of Kamchatka on map of Russia (left)

group of 19 brave underwater adventurers land on the concrete airstrip of Elizovo Airport.

History

Since ancient times, Kamchatka has been occupied by the tribes of Ilmen, Koryaks and Ainu. The first visit by a Russian to Kamchatka is not dated precisely, but Georg Wilhelm Steller (Stöller)—the historian of the first Kamchatka expedition—mentioned that Russians already lived on Kamchatka in the 17th century. There was even history about a certain person, Fed'ka, who travelled across Kamchatka and lived there for some time.

Officially, the peninsula was explored much later by Yakuts and

Anadyrs Cossacks who traveled there from the continent. Unfortunately, many documents of that time have been lost, as they were written on birch bark and stored in wet conditions in an old state office.

Eventually, Europeans discovered Kamchatka in 1729, when the Russian flotilla under command of Vitus Jonassen Bering—the Dane in the service of the Russian sovereign—rounded the peninsula from the south and made maps of the bays of Kamchatka and Avachinsky.

The peninsula is bordered by the Ohotsky and Bering Seas and the Pacific Ocean. The only overland way to Kamchatka, via the northern isthmus connecting Kamchatka with the continent, is through a land of bogs and very difficult to pass—



Map of the Kamchatka Peninsula

for such popular locations as Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. We were not in error to do so! In summer time, Russian air-monopolists raise the prices more than double the going rate, and tickets to Kamchatka become more

expensive than flights to the United States, Seoul, Hong Kong, Singapore, Manila or Tokyo.

It is a nine-hour non-stop flight between Moscow and the state capital of Kamchatka. Finally, our



The orca pod (above) was very friendly with us. They were very curious, liked our boat and sought contact with people; Puffins (inset above) can dive deep, about 30 meters, to hunt for fish. This red-beaked bird had even caught a few small fishes and tried to hide them from us; Our boat named *Orca* (right & below) really attracted all the local orca families. Did they like the sound of our engine or our maybe our experienced Captain Sergey (previously a professional submariner) in blue, standing on the stern? The sea otter (left inset) is the most clever creature of the sea

feelings of freedom of movement in three dimensions and communion with the underwater world that left indelible impressions on me for the rest of my life. Even now, as a PADI professional with hundreds of dives under my belt, I still enjoy diving, weightlessness and the feeling of comfort underwater.

almost impossible for any surface transport. Therefore, all the most necessary items for normal life for people there are delivered by ships or planes from Vladivostok. At present, Kamchatka exists as an isolated island removed from mainland Russia.

Dive operator

We were happy with our guide. In Petropavlovsk, we met Anna Butkovskaya, PADI instructor (MSDT #636191) and head of the Orca Diving Club. "Diving is my hobby which has become my favorite work now," said Anna. She told her story: "Ten years ago, I did my first dive in the Red Sea—bright unforgettable impressions—

"But Kamchatka's diving is special," Anna said, more seriously. "Here, it is difficult, much more severe, sometimes rough, diving. The water temperatures range from 14°C to -2°C depending on the season and depth. The visibility is 6-10 meters. There are thermoclines and tidal currents. The eastern (Pacific) coast of the peninsula is cut with sheer cliffs and has many deep and long gulfs and bays. This coast is



Sea lions, worried about hunting orcas, jump out of the water onto the safety of the rocks



sights and hiking the volcanoes, but for diving, August is by far not the best time. Frequent storms and poor visibility (due to many types of plankton) will make lots of problems for us.

"The underwater world of Kamchatka is unbridled—an often unpredictable element. Here, a diver is only a small particle. It attracts, frightens and commands respect simultaneously. I love our Pacific Ocean, and I will not exchange it for any warm seas. I have seen many oceans, but I've never seen another place with the unique underwater world that is here in our Kamchatka. Here, there are more than 350 fish species, seals, sea lions, sea otters, octopuses, walruses, orcas, whales, fur seals, king crabs and sea hedgehogs," said Anna.

Avachinsky Bay

The next day we went on our first dive trip to Avachinsky Bay. The bay is the



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Rocky coast of the Pacific side of Kamchatka; Unique rock formations near Starichkov Island look like huge stone whale fins from the Stone Age; Orcas patrol the local waters like Nature's coast guards

traditionally the most interesting and convenient for diving, but it is almost like diving in the ocean. It's possible to feel how strong ocean rip currents are even at 20 meters depth, and believe

me, not every diver can dive safely in such harsh conditions. By the way, you have chosen the wrong time of year for diving here. The end of summer is a good season for visiting the topside



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Diver with huge anemo-
nes in Avachinsky Bay;
Say, "Aaaaah", with su-
per big Kamchatka crab;
Hugging seaweed fronds

penetrated into my body, head and hands; and the bottom was not visible. In order to read the color screen of my dive computer, it was necessary to bring it face to face with my mask. The nervous divers and beginners could not handle any more; they inflated their BCDs and left us. Go back to the sun, folks!

We continued our descent in hopes of finding clear water below two thermoclines. But in the absolutely muddy, gray-green, dark waters, I wondered why I had to fly to the other side of the world just to dive in such terrible conditions. The irritating question itched inside my head. So far, the first dive on Kamchatka was a real upset. But finally, I got something hard underfoot—apparently, the



second largest in the world. It looks like a tiny sea—24 kilometers long with a maximum depth of 26 meters and capable (the experts say) of hosting all world's fleets in just one convenient spot.

The guides told us about a local favorite dive site named the Three Brothers—the three separate rocks—sitting at the mouth of the bay. They promised canyons decorated with sea anemones, sea hedgehogs, crabs, octopuses, plus an "adrenaline splash", as the dive could have low visibility, extremely cold water and strong currents.

Indeed, we jumped into very cold water. We did a last bubble check and started the dive. Visibility was simply not present; a piercing cold

sea floor.

It was necessary to lie down just to see the sea bottom and the stones. Even at this depth, the visibility was less than one meter. But the unique forms and colors of the surrounding landscape were quite unusual. Sponges, seaweeds and small sea anemones covered the stones and had surprisingly bright yellow, orange, pink, snow-white and red colors. Such a variety of colors I had never seen before altogether in one area of the sea.

However, in this incredible low viz, I lost my buddy immediately. With no compass and no guide, there was nothing to do but wait. The preliminary dive plan was all but





Fishers (like this guy at left) like to eat freshly caught salmon—within five minutes of the catch, they eat the salmon salted; Quadricycles, or off-road vehicles, are the most convenient form of transport in a country without roads; Both people and bears hunt the salmon that swim up river for the last time to spawn; Divers enjoy a hiking trip to the local valley of geysers to see the boiling lakes and clouds of steam



destroyed, but I decided to stay on the bottom just a few minutes more to try to see something else.

Large Kamchatka crabs were busy here; they coupled and chewed something, feeling themselves safe under the stones. Huge sea anemones hid between big boulders. But since the visibility did not exceed one meter, I was diving like a blind kitten, perceiving the world around me with touch alone. Suddenly, from the muddy environment there was a diver's hand which grabbed for one of my fins. Good luck was with me—it was my buddy. We knelt opposite each other at a distance of 50 centimeters and gesticulated madly. There was nothing more to see. The diving in the Avachinsky Bay was really extreme.

Our skipper told us that the best visibility in these places happens only in June and July. In the beginning and middle of summer, there is less sun, overcast skies or rain, but the sea is quieter and the water is clear.

Topside adventure

Nobody from our team wished to dive more in the bay. All understood that the time had come to look for new places in the open ocean, but a

strong wind and high waves changed our plans. We decided to wait for good weather, and instead, made a short land journey across Kamchatka to bide our time. Our topside



adventure included a rafting trip down the "Big Fast" river; an excursion into a mini valley of geysers at the volcano, Mutnovsky; and a quadrocycle trip to the foot of the Avachinsky and Koryak volcanoes.

Time on this adventure flew by very quickly. It was exciting to plunge into the wild nature of the peninsula, to observe wild

bears hunting for salmon, to cook food on an open fire, to spend the nights in tents, to drive quadrocycles on the forest roads as fast as possible and to photograph salmon heading to their spawning grounds through rough river rifts. But as keen divers, we quickly started to miss diving and waited with anticipation for the first possibility to go back to the ocean again.



A hunting orca (above) looks like a perfect weapon and even scares a guillemot (inset below); An unforgettable moment of diving (right) inside a massive cloud of jellyfish; Diver with one of Kamchatka's brightly colored seastars (bottom right)

Starichkov Island

The mouth of the shallow Avachinsky Bay to the ocean had changed our perception of Kamchatka considerably. The strong ocean rip current shook our small dive boat, and foamy waves broke violently along the rocky coast. Here, everything looked totally different—rugged, majestic and mystical. We were surrounded by the North Pacific, full of the power of nature and wild life. Puffins and guillemots flew over the sea and dived into the water. In search of food, they plunged to depths of 30 meters for several minutes and came back with mouths full of fish. Our presence frightened them and they sped away flapping and running with webbed feet on the water's surface to take off and fly away from our boat.

Orcas

"Orcas on the right side!" the skipper exclaimed. Everybody raced onto the deck and scanned the ocean. The first fountain of mist blew and a large one-and-a-half-meter dorsal fin of a huge orca male rose over the waves. Behind it rose more and more fountains and dorsal fins of lesser sizes. Orca cubs appeared surrounded by orca females. It was a group of orcas of no

less than 20 individuals (males, females and cubs). They passed by, along the rocky coast to the south in the direction of Starichkov Island, like we were.

"Orcas know and love our yacht," the skipper told us. "They have learned to identify the sound of our engine and propeller, have gotten used to our frequent presence in these places and have stopped being afraid." We followed the orcas with a parallel course. The orcas were busy hunting for fish. They stunned the fish with the loud noisy blows of their tail fins. The orcas dived under our ship, and it seemed that they very much enjoyed posing before us divers in order to be photographed. So, together with



these magnificent animals, we reached our next diving site.

At this dive site, Anna told us, a very amusing story happened. "Two divers saw an octopus underwater. One of them wanted to get a closer look, so he got very close to the octopus. The octopus was frightened by the diver and decided to attack the diver, spurring out black ink into the

diver's mask and ran away. The diver was so frightened by the inky reaction that came right into his mask, he jumped out of it. From the outside, it looked really funny: the frightened diver and the octopus quickly running from each other and the mask thus remained laying on the sea bed," explained Anna.





A humpback whale's tail fin tips up out of the water when it dives deep to hunt fish

We dived near the island. The sea water here was much colder; my dive computer registered 2°C. We went along a stony bottom to a depth of 20 meters where there were supposed to be huge sea anemones. A recently ended storm had mixed everything about; therefore, the visibility was about three meters.

Bright yellow, orange and red colors of the underwater landscape are pleasing to the eye, but at depth, all colors fade. In such conditions, a good underwater torch is very useful, as it was in this case.

There were huge, prickly crabs of bright red color covered with an uncountable quantity of sharp thorns, self-confidently walking slowly among luminous thickets. I attempted to play with one of the crabs; it went into a menacing pose and tried very hard to take off my finger with its monstrous claws. The big sharp thorns can easily pierce even thick neoprene gloves. It is necessary to be very cautious with such impressive Kamchatka monsters.

A forest of gigantic sea anemones

and seastars appeared at a depth of 17 meters. The tallest of the anemones reached half a meter in height. We took pictures of them, but quickly got cold and subsequently decided to start a quick ascent to the surface right from this spot. But just a couple of meters up from the bottom, we got into an extraordinarily dense layer of jellyfish.

It was a real underwater phenomenon, like a jellyfish wedding or a macabre underwater festival of pulsating globes. The jellyfish were so active, that even when I tried to push one aside, it quickly, purposefully and persistently ran into me again. We forgot about the cold and stayed in the thick of the jellyfish cloud, enthusiastically observing their movements and taking pictures. Other skilled divers have told us that they have seen a similar jellyfish gathering, only it was in a tropical lake—Jellyfish Lake on Palau. But finding a jellyfish cloud in ice cold Pacific waters on Kamchatka was doubly exciting, interesting and delightful.

Orcas also use their tail fins, whacking the surface of the water loudly to stun fishes they then eat (above); Views of humpback whales (top)

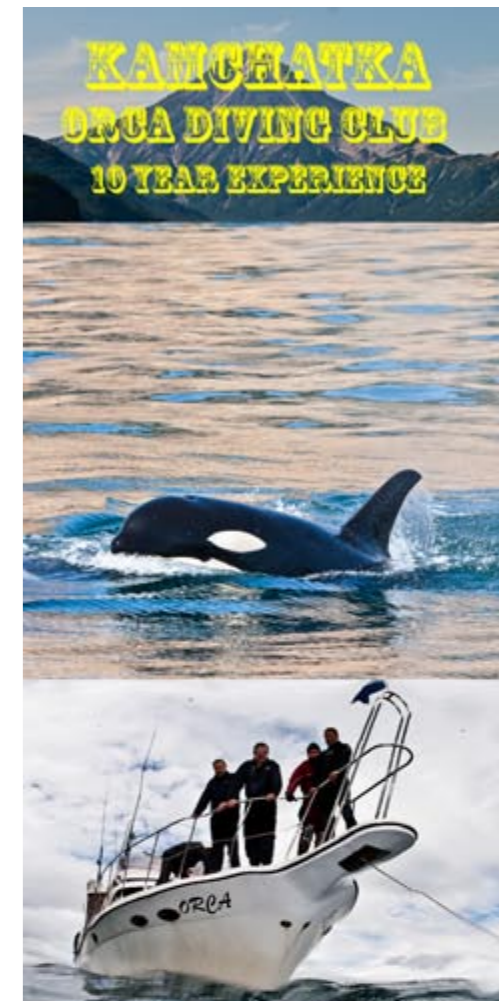


Close-up view of jellyfish



THIS PAGE: Exciting diving with curious sea lions looking to communicate and share contact with divers. It is the absolute highlight of diving on Kamchatka

Kamchatka



Back on the boat, fascinated by what we had seen, talking loudly, discussing, admiring and swinging our hands about, we turned back towards the town of Petropavlovsk. But then, humpback whales grabbed our attention. They were feeding directly at the mouth of Avachinsky Bay.

These huge underwater giants, of a size much larger than our boat, blew up noisy fountains of mist and circled around us with big, wide, gaping mouths, collecting something tasty from the sea surface. Periodically, they lifted their tail fins and dived deeply; then they again rose to the surface—paying no heed to our noisy shouts of excitement and the sound of our boat engine—and continued to be engaged in their important whale affairs.

Yes, the long-awaited day of diving had gone wonderfully right and well. We saw orcas and humpback whales, dived with monster crabs, swam through actinium gardens and spent some enthusiastic minutes in a natural stew of live jellyfish. Life was good.

Diving with sea lions

We left Petropavlovsk at 4:00am the next morning in order to have time to reach Russian Bay—a cozy, rocky place on the coast where sea lions have chosen to make a home for themselves.

Huge rust-colored sea lions (steller sea lions) spend all their summers here—feeding, warming



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The alpha male (sea lion bull) with his harem, very protective of his girlfriends and jealous of us; Diving seal (below right) demonstrates incredible mobility

themselves in the sun, getting fat, raising pups and hiding from orcas. In order not to disturb the large animals, we silently entered the water from our boat about 200 meters from them. We swam to a site where we could observe the seals underwater. We stopped at seven meters depth and waited in hopes of a miracle—that the natural curiosity of the sea lions would get them to dive into the water and come see us.

Really, curiosity is the surprising natural phenomenon pushing both people and animals into improbable adventures. Within five minutes, a group of sea lions of at least ten to 15 individuals came to examine and sniff us out from all sides. They obviously discussed us among themselves.

They came as close as possible to us. With big, wide open, brown eyes, they looked directly into our masks, carefully bit our fins, tasting them, and one even gave me a kick in the back for good measure—for in front of me, there was “a terrible” bulky camera with wide-spread strobes.

The sea lions did not lose interest in us for the entire hour of diving. I was delighted to be able to take around a hundred shots or so of these wonderful creatures and only came up to the surface when when my air tank was empty. All of us divers were full of euphoria.

The female sea lions had disappeared somewhere, but the big five-meter-long sea lion bull came up out of the water 50 meters from us. His head was



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Kamchatka

similar in size with that of an adult bear. He was very protective of his territory and his harem of sea lions, looking at us with such jealousy that we instantly felt we had exceeded our stay, challenging his permission and intruding on his private territory.

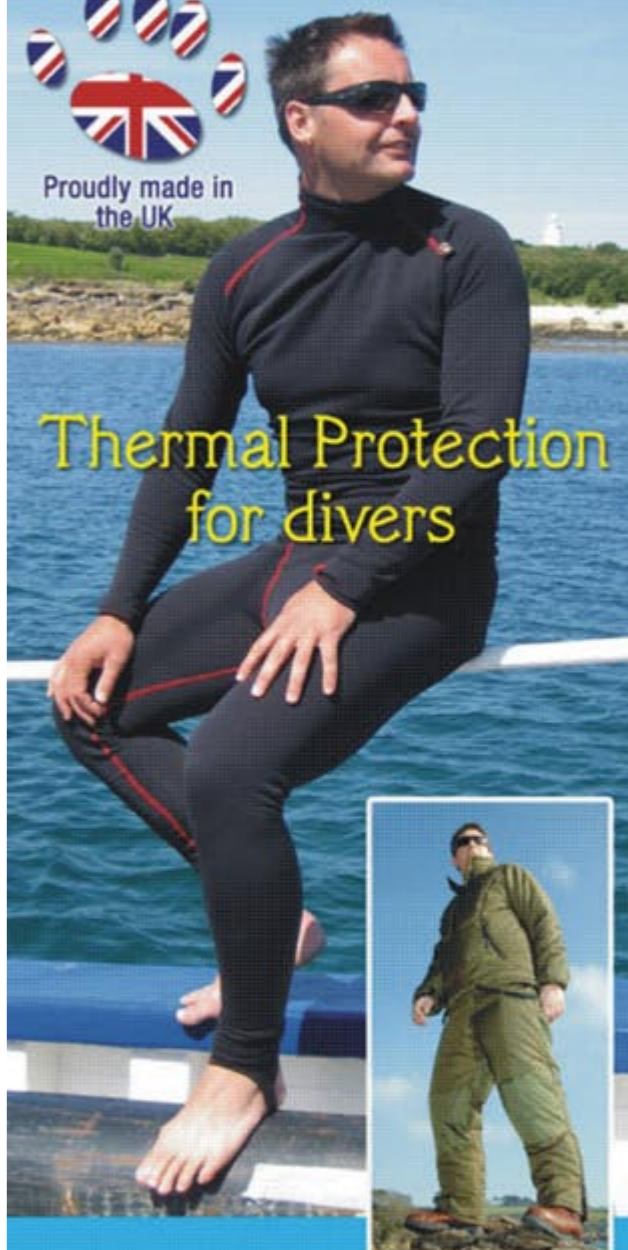
In an instant, as if by a single command, we all switched on our "fifth gear" and forced our fins into action desperately trying to reach our boat. The excited sea lion bull charged with such force and speed when he rushed at us that we understood at once that we were dead meat. In actuality, we did not have a prayer to get out of the confrontation. Only a miracle could rescue us, and so, it did—in the form of an inflatable boat with a motor and a skilled diver at the helm who kept control of the situation and reacted instantly. At

Support team (left) picks up divers on the surface; Hot springs at +40°C sooth muscles after a long day of hiking (bottom left); Fresh caught sea food make a feast for us cold water divers (below)

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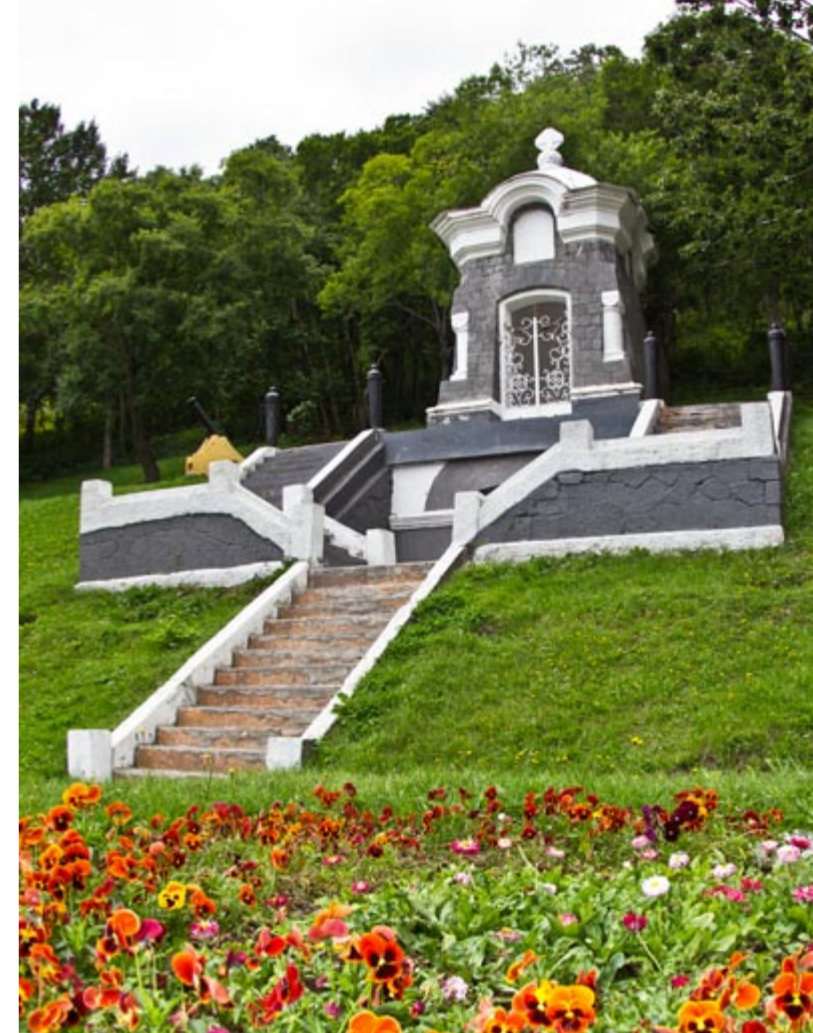


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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The quadricycle tour to the foothills of Avachinsky Volcano (left); Anchorage near mouth of Russian Bay; Memorial for British and French Navy seamen who died in an attempt to capture the city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky during Russian-Turkish war; Aerial view of Kamchatka

full speed, the zodiac “cut off” the path of the bull charging us, and frightened off the animal, effectively discharging the heated situation.

The technique of diving with sea lions was thought up and tested personally by Anna Butkovskaya, and its prime directive was an insistent requirement: do not pursue sea lions, just stay in place and wait for a miracle. Sea lions should not associate with divers because of the possible danger; divers should tease the sea lions’ natural feeling of curiosity only. And such a philosophy works 100 percent of the time. “Sea lions here are absolutely

pristine. Just developed, this is my favorite dive site. Diving here is like diving on one breath,” Anna told us.

Diving with the sea lions provided emotional highs and delights which completely compensated

for all the difficulties of our first days of diving on Kamchatka. The general conclusion of all the members of our group was unequivocal, we had to fly back again to Kamchatka just to dive with these graceful and extraordinary, flexible and charismatic animals.

Afterthoughts

Before coming back home, all of the divers in our group discussed diving on Kamchatka together. As a long-term resident of the peninsula, Anna explained the underlying vision of her

quest: “I am very enthusiastic about the preservation of our underwater world. People often destroy more than they create. Sometimes just to get food or money for living, people do not spare the underwater world. On Kamchatka, there are still untouched virgin places, and there is a lot to see. It would be desirable, that, as much as possible, divers could see our still untouched underwater world while we still can conserve it and save it from the fate of the Asian seas where there are now absolutely empty underwater regions. Let’s save and protect the natural world of Kamchatka! I wish to address this call to all the divers who live and dive on the peninsula, and also to all those who come to visit.

And I also have another dream: to organize a dive trip to see the orcas of Kamchatka. Orcas are worthy of our respect and sincere admiration. I have



not seen anything better in the world than the orcas of Kamchatka. Come with me next time, and we will dive

together! And you will be convinced that Kamchatka will not leave you indifferent,” said Anna as she finished her story. ■