

The vast Kamchatkan peninsula, in Russia's far northeast corner, is so remote that many of its mountains are yet to be officially named. Those that are have generally acquired a moniker because they're big, high and volcanic – in fact one of the peaks, Mutnovski, last erupted only seven years ago. And if you go heliskiing here, chances are you'll ski down its flanks.

Kamchatka is one of the most active volcanic regions on Earth. It is also home to the world's highest concentration of grizzly bears (which you may spot while skiing as the season runs into May), and it has without doubt some of the most awe-inspiring landscapes on the planet in which to ski.

Just getting to the start of your first ski run is an unforgettable adventure. The coach journey to the heliport takes you from the grim, ash-grey streets of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, a throwback to Cold War days, and beneath the smoking summit of the 2,751-metre Avachinsky volcano. Don't worry if you don't get a good view – you will be skiing down it later.

At the heliport the smell of aviation fuel and the thump of the massive rotor blades of the distinctly utilitarian Mi-8 helicopters, in which you'll be flying, create an immediate frisson of excitement. Clamber into the back with twelve fellow riders and your guides, then settle back for the shuddering 30-

minute flight into the heart of a world heritage site that Unesco describes, with understatement, as 'exceptional natural beauty and diversity'.

It is impossible not to notice the distinctly minimalist interior of the craft. One of the helicopters we used was literally held together in places by string – very strong Russian string I'm sure, but string nonetheless. There are no seat belts attached to the hard bench seats and the fuselage is big enough for you can wander around during the flight. You can even open the porthole-like windows and stick your head out to get a better view.

The views through those portholes are awe inspiring – to the east the cobalt blue waters of the Pacific lap against a snowbound shoreline, while in every other direction range upon range of snow-shrouded mountains lay in a powder-blue haze beneath clear, sunny skies, banners of smoke and steam rising where cracks in their flanks extend down to the Earth's core.

Elixir discovered

Each run starts with skiers and boarders tumbling out of the chopper and cowering close to the ground, in a blizzard of rotor-whipped snow, until the machine has clattered away to meet the group later in a valley some 2,000 metres below. Once the snow has settled and silence returned to the

Blades of glory

A far cry from your regular ski resort, [Alf Anderson](#) reports on his Heliskiing adventure in Kamchatka, one of the most volcanic regions in the world.





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mountains it would be easy to just stand and stare at the awesome panoramas on view, were it not for the magnificent sight directly below – an untracked powder field the size of which no ski resort in the world can match.

Marco Gaiani, our Chamonix-based UIAGM mountain guide makes us wait while he leads the way. Having skied with guides before, I'm used to seeing them skid to a halt a few hundred metres downslope then hailing the rest of the group to follow, but the terrain here is so vast that by the time Marco stops he's but a tiny speck in the distance and calls his partner Andrey, by radio, to tell us to set off.

Then follows two minutes of floating through shin-deep powder, soft, light and deep, and quite clearly the very elixir of life – how else to explain the wide grins and whoops of joy from every skier and boarder in the group? But it's not just the snow that brings this feeling of utter exhilaration – it's also the vastness of the landscape, the absolute wilderness in which we're immersed and knowing there isn't another skier for several thousand miles in any direction.

Exhilarating extras

Eventually, almost 2,000 metres below our start point, the group glides to a halt in dribs and drabs beside the helicopter, having just completed what is, without doubt, the most exciting, exhilarating and extraordinary ski run any of us have ever experienced.

The bright orange Mi-8 may be waiting for us in a valley where a small stream meanders across a wide, snowy flood plain; it could be tucked beside steaming hot springs where we can slide into the water and ease tired muscles; or, my particular favourite, sitting on a pebbly beach, giving us the unique opportunity to ski to the sea and go skinny dipping in 4°C water.

Non-stop skiing

On our first day in Kamchatka we enjoyed a massive 11,570 metres of downhill on the flanks of the dormant 2,175-metre Viluchinski volcano, and with the weather holding clear and sunny for the following four days we never did less than 8–9,000 metres of 'vert' each day. On one of those

days we even skied into the crater of Mutnovski volcano beside hissing vents and bubbling thermal pools.

It's demanding stuff, since conditions on the slopes can vary considerably, due to Kamchatka's maritime location. However, the guides are adept at finding the best snow, from smooth and creamy 'spring snow' on sun-warmed afternoon slopes to unforgettable evening runs on north-facing pitches. The powder is soft and deep and the 'rooster tails' we kick up turn to glitter in the sun. This is an image that remains seared into my memory, like so much of the Kamchatkan ski experience, which truly is like nothing else on earth.

Getting there

The Kamchatkan heliski season runs from March to mid-May. Elemental Adventure (www.eaheliskiing.com; 0870 738 7838; info@eaheli.com) offers ten-day packages from €3,950 per person, including visas, accommodation, ten hours heli time (averaging 35,000 vertical metres), internationally certified guides and all safety equipment. Flights to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky are extra and only available with Aeroflot.

In the know

James Morland of Elemental Adventure realised there was a market among adventurous skiers for something challenging and out of the ordinary. He ran the company's first trip to Kamchatka in 2006. Morland advises clients that: 'This is adventure skiing rather than powder skiing. You'll get plenty of powder but you should be prepared for all conditions. Over a ten-day period you'll get several down days, due to Kamchatka's changeable and wild weather, but we can pretty much guarantee at least four days of skiing, and the skiing is comparable with anywhere in the world.' This from a man who has heliskied in Alaska and the Caucasus, so his comparisons are pertinent.

And on the down days? 'Well,' says Morland, 'the Cosmic nightclub in Petropavlovsk always seems popular with our clients – one guy almost got himself married off to a very attractive local girl he met there.' ■