

Exploring the wilderness of the Kamchatka Peninsula by mountain bike, and on foot for six weeks (2002)

High volcanoes, and unknown bear paths

or:

"Go faster, or the mosquitoes will get you!"

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Busy streets into wild nature

So, where shall we camp tonight? It seems a strange question in a region that offers spectacular and untouched nature with lots of wild camping opportunities, as soon as one leaves the major towns behind. Since we don't want to pitch our blue tent directly next to the main asphalt road, we are now searching for a small side track. It is the evening of our second day on the Kamchatka Peninsula, and we are not able to ride another kilometer. The previous night was far too short, the breakfast in the Hotel "Edelsweiss" in Petropavlovsk was unsuitable for active cyclists, and we still have not fully adjusted to the eleven-hour time difference. We can still not quite believe, that only yesterday we had arrived at this far eastern end of the world. At the airport of Petropavlovsk we had put together our bikes and the new suspended trailer "IBEX" (luckily everything had arrived safely and in good condition!), then we had cycled 35 km into Petropavlovsk, the biggest town of Kamchatka. During the remaining day, we had completed our food we brought from Germany with things from the local market, and had registered our visas. After a night in dreadful hotel beds, we now enjoy the silence of nature and the comfort of our tent, which will be our home for the next six weeks. Even the sound of the mosquitoes is more enjoyable than the traffic noise of Petropavlovsk, which we have now escaped.

Do bears snore?

There is one disadvantage to our scenic first camping spot in a blooming meadow: we have discovered fresh bear tracks nearby. As we have basically just arrived in Kamchatka, we are not yet sure how to deal with the situation. However, our concerns are weakened by our tiredness. During the next days we will learn to judge situations like this... *Ursos arctor piscator*, as the Kamchatka bear is called scientifically, is among the largest brown bears of the world. Noise is an effective means to chase them away, at least that is what we were told. During the day this is not a problem. We produce enough "noise" while riding to warn bears way in advance. But what about at night? Shall we snore? Or would that attract them? What about our food? Does it smell good to them? Do they like pasta, or do they prefer the pudding we have for dessert? The trees in the surrounding are not high enough to store our food safely. We agree to leave our food stores in the panniers at the bikes, and stack the unwashed pots from our meals in a pile 5 m away from the tent. If a bear will become curious, we are certain he'd be first interested in the pots and thus knock down the pile. The noise would then hopefully scare him away and also wake us up... Further reactions then need to be adjusted to the situation, and we truly hope that a visiting bear will be only curious and not aggressive or hungry. During fall the bears usually find plenty of food in nature: berries, mushrooms, and most importantly, salmon. However, this year, the salmon are somewhat late...

Rain turns dusty tracks into mud

Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. If there's enough calories and taste early in the day, then there will be no problems during the day. Every morning we mix ground buckwheat, oats, dry fruit, nuts, sugar, and milk powder, and then pour hot water over it to make a delicious high energy breakfast. We have immediately forgotten the hotel breakfast we had yesterday...

With such a good start for the day, we do not care about the rain that has started soon after we were back on the road. By noon we are completely wet, but luckily with the right clothes on, we are staying warm. Already in the early morning, we had reached the end of the paved road, 115 km behind Petropavlovsk. Now we are on the dusty dirt track on our way to Milkowo, a small town 320 km away. With the track being wet from rain, dirt splashes up from our tires every time we go

through one of the thousand water-filled potholes. But mainly it's the passing trucks that make us look like we'd been in the wilderness already for weeks without washing our faces. However, everything has its good side: at least the mosquitoes are not active in such weather. At camp near a clear mountain stream, we are too tired to worry about cleaning our panniers, clothes, or the dry sac of the trailer, which is covered with a thick layer of dirt. The evening meal consisting of rice with some specially prepared dried vegetables, and a hot tea are much more tempting. The rain has stopped, and we can at least put up a rope between our tent and a nearby tree to dry our clothes. As soon as the rain stopped, the mosquitoes are back, and with them also some sort of small black flies, that bite painfully.

Giant plants and wild birch forest

The next day welcomes us with a spectacular red sunrise, a few high clouds and a terrific view to the mountains forming the border of the wide valley of the Kamchatka River. We are following this valley north on a track through the foothills, currently on the west side of the Kamchatka River. The wind is cool and blows into our faces from a northern direction – at least that keeps the mosquitoes away. We can see large areas of birch forest, which seem to be untouched by forest industry. The trees are not used for commercial logging, since their uneven growth form does not allow to cut the trunk into nice straight boards. After the rainy day, the different colors of green look very lush and fresh, and the air is clean. The undergrowth of the birch forest consists of up to three meter high perennial plants, many of them blooming in late summer. It is a sight of wild and pretty nature! In higher elevations, bogs and tundra mainly dominate the landscape.

Fresh bread and cabbage

The closer we approach the town Milkowo, the more we can see the plains of the Kamchatka valley being dominated by agriculture. Meadows, fields for cereal, potato, carrots, peas, or buckwheat now dominate our views. About 20 km before Milkowo we are surprised by finding a new asphalt street that is obviously being extended slowly towards the south. Milkowo itself is a small town that developed around an important military base, and today is the capital city of the central Kamchatka region. Apart from a sawmill processing larch and pinewood from central Kamchatka, there is not much industry in Milkowo. Life in this town seems to be dominated by high rate of unemployment. The selection of goods offered in the grocery stores and on the market is highly variable. We need to stock up on a few things, and after a short search into different stores and a round on the market, we are set again and escape the dusty town. The city center mainly consists of the typical concrete houses that are of the same style that is so well known between East Germany and North Korea. Every free land space within the city is covered with small wooden greenhouses, where people grow vegetables and potatoes. Every now and then, among the concrete blocks we can spot one of the old wooden houses typical for Siberia – unfortunately they are rarely well maintained. Run-down factories make up the city border, no wonder that population is decreasing here.

No water due to a wrong map!

I'm lying in the tent, close to a physical collapse. It is 10 p.m., the sun is still barely up over the horizon, the sky is cloudless – it couldn't be more perfect. However, we ran into an unexpected problem today: no water. We had too much believed into the map of Kamchakta (the World Aeronautic Maps) we had brought from home. The track is not following the Kamchatka valley as shown on the map, but rather leads over a mountain ridge that does not cross any river on a distance of over 90 km. Already around noon we had crossed the last river (without knowing so), and now we are fighting our way along with empty water bottles... Still hoping to find water behind the next curve... We were riding through a dense forest of larch and fir, and dry lichens and small shrubs dominate the undergrowth. This forest is being logged regularly; obviously this is what the sawmill back in Milkowo gets supplied with. Especially the straight tall larch trees are being cut down. It is depressing to see the clear cuts. However, birch, willows, and aspen trees soon take over the territory. Suddenly we heard the noise of some large forestry truck coming from a sidetrack – there must be a logging camp! This was our chance to get some water... They must have water... The lumbermen were truly astonished to see two dusty and sweaty persons approach on bicycles. We immediately had explain to them where we are from, where we are going, why are we doing this, etc. etc. Luckily one of them spoke a few words of English, since our

Russian is very limiting. We were allowed to fill our water sack from a tank, and then rode a few more kilometers before we allowed us the necessary rest after a total of 130 kilometers. I guess the lumbermen now have something to talk about for the rest of the week ...

Crossing the Kamchatka River

The ferry is approaching from the east side of the River as we reach the west bank. The river has tremendously gained in size since we last had crossed it 400 km further south. Since we had left the dry mountain ridge and had come back into the plains of the Kamchatka River, the track had significantly lost in quality. Not only that we had to find a way around several pot holes, the surface additionally seemed to be made of fist-sized rocks, presumably pebbles from an ancient river bed – we were glad to be equipped with suspension forks and also the suspended trailer IBEX dos a great job! On our way we had to cross two smaller rivers, ideal spots for long rests and chances for a good wash after days on the dusty track. The water was icy cold, but it was extremely refreshing with daytime temperatures reaching the 30°C mark.

Now that we are back in the moist plains of the river, we are convinced that there is a higher density of mosquitoes down here, and they surely are the more aggressive ones we have so far experienced. Waiting for the ferry to reach the platform was painful – as soon as we stopped riding, we became easy targets for them. They seem to be the largest mosquitoes I've ever seen, and they have striped legs. From the riverbank we can now for the first time see one of our goals for this trip, the volcano Tolbatschik. Its ice cap can be seen high above the green trees, almost indistinguishable from the bright white clouds. As we push our bikes onto the pontoon ferry, which is maneuvered by a small boat attached to the side, a Russian coal truck with a trailer also joins across. Surprisingly we do not need to pay the fare, bicycles are not included on price list for different vehicles.

Cows on the soccer field

This evening we have found a mosquito-free camping spot! It's amazing, but it seems that the mosquitoes do not like the extended ash fields that we had passed through on the east side of the Kamchatka River. Only very slowly the vegetation is regaining growth on this 60-year-old ashfield. Some trees look very rugged and crippled, they must have survived the great outbreak of the Tolbatschik in 1941. The ash field heats up during the day and is a very dry environment; this makes it uncomfortable for the mosquitoes. We enjoy the possibility to walk in the warm volcanic ash with bare feet without being attacked by swarms of mosquitoes as usual.

During the next day we reach the village Kozyrevsk, one of the oldest Russian settlements in Kamchatka. To our great surprise, this village still has the typical look of a Siberian village with nicely decorated wooden houses, large gardens with stable fences, and dusty unsealed tracks. Cows are grazing on the soccer field; children are playing in the street. People here live of forestry and fishery; there is no further industry. We first approach the grocery store, which is well stocked and also contains a lot of products produced by locals of the village. People are friendly, wave to us and want to know usual where from, where to. Then they help us to find gasoline for our stove, as there is no official gas station in the village. We were first taken to the house of the forest management officer, who then contacted another person, to whom we were then taken. This person had a big barrel of "what ever gasoline" in his shed and donated one liter to us. We never really found out what kind of gasoline it was – our Primus stove did not work very well with it, but it served its purpose.

Where is the right track?

During the afternoon, we are trying to find the right track leading to the volcano Tolbatschik. A truck driver points out to us one track, seemingly heading into the right direction – but after strenuous 25 km we realize that we must be wrong, this track is not leading to where we want to go. Not only the swarms of mosquitoes make this track hell for cyclists, but also the fact that we cannot find any water anywhere along this 25 km uphill stretch make it truly uncomfortable. We had to wear our bug shirts, but at temperatures well over 25°C sweat is constantly running down our cheeks. As we have used up our water supply up to one full water bottle each, we finally decided to head back. After a challenging downhill stretch we are in Kozyrevsk again that same evening – we feel somewhat frustrated and tired. For the moment, "our" mountain has moved very far away, and for

this moment we feel that it will be hard to get there at all. At the riverbank of the Kamchatka River we can find a nice spot to set up our tent. We'll give it another try tomorrow... Soon, many curious people from the village arrive at our tent. With our broken Russian and their few words of English we get more information about different tracks, schematic maps are drawn into the sand. It gives us back some confidence for the next day.

During the night some drunk teenagers wakened us, who tried to impress us with their non-existing motorcycle skills, thereby destroying one of the lines of our tent. They are having fun driving in short circles around our tent, yelling, and asking for money. As we talk to them, thereby friendly, but determinedly refusing both, unlocking our bikes or joining vodka rounds, they soon leave us alone (It's 3 o'clock in the morning...). From this incident we learned, and never again camped so close to villages.

Ash in the forest

Early in the morning we pack our gear and leave the village Kozyrevsk. Soon we find the track that was described to us yesterday – but we cannot hope for any road signs. Nothing. Will this be the right way? Only the locals know, where those many sidetracks lead. It seems that nobody has cycled here before. Some of the locals back in Kozyrevsk shook their heads, indicating that they thought it would be impossible to cycle up to the Tolbatschik ash field. We'll see. But the first few kilometers seem to indicate exactly that – it is impossible! The track consists of fine volcanic ash, as fine as flour, dusty at every step. Even with 4WD vehicles, this is a challenge, and we sink in a few centimeters with every step, although we try to stick to the tracks made by 4WD trucks. Riding is impossible; we have to push our bikes. The conditions seem to be against us: it is hot, sun is burning, and in the forest mosquitoes are as aggressive as we have experienced it on the wrong track yesterday.

Our progress is about 3 km per hour – very frustrating. The only thing that keeps us going is that we are sure that this will be a limited stretch of soft underground, and that once the track starts climbing we would be able to ride again. We also need a lot of water; our supplies are already getting low. Once we will reach the first of three rivers to cross, we'd be safe again.

From river to river

The first river! After approximately 8 km of fine ash, it relieves us from the strenuous work. From here on riding is possible again. Even the mosquitoes give us a break; they don't seem to like the wide riverbeds without vegetation. In the center of the large riverbed, which currently has only three smaller river arms, we decide to have a good lunch break with plenty of water. Crossing the river is not much of a problem for us, except that pushing the bike over some of the large cobblestones is hard work. Back in Kozyrevsk they had told us that once water levels were rising, crossing of this river can be very dangerous or nearly impossible – we hope for good conditions once we will come back down. It is only a few kilometers ride to the second creek, and we decide to travel uphill as lightweight as possible and stock up water for the night at the third river further up. Although riding is hard work – the track leads continuously uphill – we feel very confident. So far, the description by the locals was good, and we are sure to be on the right track. As we reach the third river, we are shocked: it is dried out, only soft mud is left. In addition, the track we were following also seems to end here. What to do? We turn back a few 100 m, and follow a small track leading to the left. It seems that a truck driver has also tried to find a way around the mud. After six kilometers through forest with dense and high shrub undergrowth, we again reach the “third river”, now the track passes through what is left – a small muddy puddle. No drinking water... It is now mid afternoon, and we still have one-and-a-half full drinking bottles each, in addition to 1.5 L of water in one larger bottle. Shortly we estimate how far we still need to go: Didn't the locals mention an alpine camp 18 km after the third river? Water is supposed to be there. Let's go then – there's daylight until 11 p.m. so no worries...

Forest in ashes

The track up to the ash field is becoming steeper and steeper. In addition, we often have to cross fresh lava fields, with fist-sized rocks lying on the track. Riding uphill is extremely hard work – but pushing the bike is not much of a relief either. After steep sections we take short breaks, then we

ride another 50 m, another break. It is 28°C and we need drink a lot. At some point we realize that 18 km can be bloody far to go.

Dead trees are silent witnesses of the last eruption of Tolbatschik in 1976. Several square meters of forest had burnt and were covered with a thick layer of volcanic ash. Now vegetation is coming back. Young poplar trees are starting to grow in the lava fields, and a reddish blooming pioneer herb covers wide areas. The colors are in great contrast to the blue sky and the white ice fields of the volcanoes, which we can now spot through the trees. For the first time, we now have full sight to the summit of Tolbatschik with its beautiful glacier. From a lava wall, we now can also have a sight to the ash field with the different side craters of Tolbatschik. Then the depressing sight: Like a thin line we can spot the track as it is leading through the ash field.

Soon we are only pushing our bikes, some sections even require two persons to push across. We are too tired, and also the track becomes very steep and is more and more consisting of fine volcanic ash. At the forest borderline (elevation about 700m), we decide to hide the bikes and continue our climb on foot. We had hoped to be able to cycle a bit further, but we anyway had planned to continue the final ascent on foot. From this spot we now have a good sight of "our" mountain and estimate that we can hike to the summit and return in three days. In addition, the nearby trees provide good opportunities to hide bikes and gear.

Thirst, exhaustion, and sore muscles

But first we need to solve a problem: we have not much water left, and the ash field is extremely dry. What to do? We have one chance: We need to give our bodies and muscles some rest (as much as possible with 0.5 L of water each), then get up way before sunrise and walk all the way to the river coming from the Tolbatschik glacier. We can see the glacier in the distance, but it is hard to estimate any distances. Also, we do not know how well we will be able to walk on soft ash, which gave us so much trouble cycling.

So, there will be no evening meal today, due to lack of water. How could we get into this situation? We had too much relied on that the third river would carry water allowing us to fill our stores for the evening. And then, somehow the distances to some alpine camp mentioned by the locals were not really correct either. Dried fruit, a few cookies, and some nuts, that's all we are having tonight, with it a few sips from the almost empty water bottle. A total of one liter is set aside for the next day, and we drink the remaining water during the night – but it is not enough. We dream of water, our bodies are asking for more, but our minds do not allow it.

At 4 a.m. we pack our gear and head for the glacier, and hopefully water. At first we follow the track a bit, but soon traverse directly to our goal, as the track obviously leads to somewhere else. We are not used to walking with heavy backpacks and feel somewhat clumsy. However, we are still putting on a good pace, since we need to reach water before temperatures again rise to 28°C. After a little more than four hours of continuous hiking, we reach the river coming from the glacier. Lucky enough we even discover a small spring with fresh and clear water. We feel like in heaven – clear mountain water, what a treat! After a long rest at the spring, we climb up to 1400 m altitude, where we want to set up our base camp for the climb of Tolbatschik crater rim (3000 m) on the following day. There, we spend the afternoon relaxing in the sun, drinking sweet tea and giving our sore legs a bit of rest.

On the Tolbatschik crater rim

It's an early start for the day again – at 5 a.m. we leave camp. We carry only one backpack with the essentials for the day. The remaining gear is left behind at the base camp. The weather is ideal: no clouds, clear fresh air, and almost no wind. There is no set trail. We need to find our own way. This is exciting; it makes one feel like the first and only persons here. We had already planned our route from the base camp; we had chosen the ridge to climb up, and where to cross the first snowfields. Now that we are making our way up the moraine fields, we notice that it would well be impossible to find the way without seeing the summit for navigation. Soon we have reached the first snowfields at 1700 m altitude, from 2000 m on we are exclusively walking on hard snow surfaces. Sometimes it is very slippery, and we need to be very considerate where to step. Since we are not wearing crampons, we decide for the easiest way up, meaning that we will "only" be able to reach the summit of "Plosky Tolbatschik", 3000 m high. The main peak "Ostry Tolbatschik"

is 3700 m high, but it would be too risky to attempt a climb without alpine gear. At noontime we arrive at the crater rim, and immediately have two breath-taking views: One is into the almost 500 m deep crater, and one is the 360° view into the surrounding of the mountain. In the north, we can see the Kliuchevskoy, which is the highest volcano of Eurasia (4750 m high), and in the south we can spot the volcano Kronozky (3528m) at a distance of 200 km. In the region of Kliuchevskoy and Tolbatschik, the Pacific plate moves 10 mm a year under the Asian plate, leading to heavy volcanic activity in this region. Also Tolbatschik, which had been silent for 30 years now, can become active again any time.

Remote meadows

Within two hours, we are back in the base camp. After nine hours on the move, we think we can add another hour and descend all the way to the small spring we had found the previous day. The sun is shining from the blue sky and temperatures again reach well over 20°C. Since we had left the forest, there are no more mosquitoes, which is a great relief for us.

The alpine meadow over which we are now descending is very rich in blooming plants – we recognize a few, but many of them we have never seen before. And the view back to Tolbatschik is still breathtaking. Our blue tent, which we have put up next to the mountain spring, can be seen from a far distance as contrast to the green meadows. But nobody comes by, for all the time we spent at the mountain we have not seen another person. And then we know, that Tolbatschik and its ash fields are part of the sight seeing program of many tour operators. We can only hope, that at also the locals down in Kozyrevsk will be able to earn some money with increasing tourism, and not only big tour operators from Petropavlovsk or Moscow.

Back to the main track

During the next day we were hiking back to our bikes. We spent another day at the spot where we left the bikes behind, this time with sufficient fresh water we had carried from the mountain spring. Then we enjoy the downhill ride. It seems unbelievable that we actually had made it up that far... We very much enjoy how well we can ride fully geared and how smooth the IBEX follows all the movements. We can ride most of the way, but we still need to be extremely cautious not to fall over large lava rocks and to keep our bikes straight in the narrow tracks of the 4WD trucks. Every now and then, when concentration ceases, I hit the side of the narrow track with the front panniers, leading to an immediate stop and jump over the handle bar.

The ecstasy of downhill riding is suddenly replaced by reality: we have reached river "number one". Immediately we notice that the water level is higher – maybe snowmelt has increased in the hot weather of the last few days. Luckily we have waterproof panniers and also the dry sack of the trailer is waterproof. But it is hard work to push the bikes through the strong current of the river, and the trailer presents an additional target. Now we begin to understand, why the riverbed is so wide. It must be an amazing scene during snowmelt in spring!

The mosquito-free riverbed and the fascinating view to the volcanoes Kliuchevskoy and Bezymianny make us decide to spend a night at the river, even though we have not covered a lot of distance today. We were rewarded by a picturesque sunset during which the ash erupting from Kliuchevskoy seemed to be bright orange. In the far background we can also again see the white glacier of Tolbatschik. A truly great scenery.

Dust and traffic

The next morning awaits us with 10 km through fine ash dust – we were close to giving up there on our way in. Now we know the distance to the main track, this is an enormous psychological help. In addition, we are surprised how much better we can walk, and even sometimes ride through the dust section in this early morning hour. Due to the moisture of the dew the dust has solidified over great stretches, making it a lot easier for us, than we had remembered it. And even the mosquitoes are still somewhat slow at this early time of the day. Temperatures at night had decreased almost to 0°C.

At noon we are back at the ferry across the Kamchatka River. The guy at the ferry shook his head – where did we go? He could not believe we had taken our bikes up to the ash field of Tolbatschik. Only as I show him my hand-drawn sketch of Tolbatschik and the route we climbed, he is

convinced. The fare for bikes still is free... Now, back on the main track, we have to get used to truck traffic again.

We return to Petropavlovsk on the same route that we had cycled north a few weeks ago. There are no alternative tracks. The alternatives we had considered from our map turned out to be non-existent. Although we know the landscape and the track from our way north, we still always discover new things, and we now can see mountain peaks that were covered in clouds earlier. And we recognize something else: summer is over, fall is starting. Many flowers have finished blooming; the first leaves of birch trees are now yellow. Seasons go fast here...

Also the dry mountain ridge, which has no water for over 90 km, is no problem anymore. With the IBEX filled with 10 liters of fresh river water, we are set and even find a great camping spot on the ridge with wild raspberries growing next to our tent – they made a great dessert.

Rain, rain, rain

We hear the rain hit the tent. Frustration already before we get up. Packing a wet tent is no fun, and our hope for a change vanishes after a view to the sky – gray and low clouds all over. The clouds move in from the south – so we'd have the rain in our faces. Soon we reach the town Milkowo. Our shopping list is long. The first store has half of what we want to get, the second one has a quarter of things on our list, and in the third store we can get the remaining goods. This is the reality during the transition from socialism to the free market... Also strange situations at the gas station: "One liter you want? That's not possible, the pump won't do that". After a short discussion it is working after all.

Only 20 km south of Milkowo, and after 54 km for the day, we resign. It's no fun in the rain, and it does not look promising for the rest of the day, so why not stop early. Hope for tomorrow. In addition, since we have left Milkowo the track had been graded but not compressed making it hard for cyclists. Our wheels sink in a few centimeters; it feels like constantly riding with the brakes on. Now we reward ourselves with a big hot meal, and some dried Mango fruit for dessert. That makes us forget the rain for a moment.

The first night frost

Rain also the next morning. We still move on. Surprisingly, although air pressure continues to fall, the rain stops at noon. A cold northern wind pushes back the clouds, and helps us travel south with high speed. A few kilometers behind a small pass, on the tundra height where the Kamchatka River emerges, we can find a great camping spot for the night. The sky is now clear, and with that northern wind, we also have no mosquitoes. On the next morning our tent is covered with a thick layer of ice, and so are the bikes and panniers. From now on the mosquitoes are gone, but we do need to pull up our warm clothes from the very bottom of our bags... Only at noon our fingers are warm, while the feet remain icy cold.

Salmon with rice

The track is getting worse. Near Malka, a small village, it seems as if tanks have ruined the surface. It seems to be one pothole besides the other, and big rocks embedded in the surface making smooth riding impossible. Even cars slow down and drive very carefully. We are looking forward to the paved road, which we will reach today. To our surprise the paved road had been extended two kilometers in our direction giving us some unexpected relief. But it is only for a short time. We do not yet want to return to Petropavlovsk, but rather explore the track leading to Ust-Bolsherevsk at the west coast of Kamchatka. Silently we had hoped it would be paved all the way, but this turned out to just a dream. Moreover, the track leading westward turned out to be worse than what we had experienced near Malka. In addition it has heavy traffic. After nine kilometers on our new track, we decided to call it a day, and turn into a small sidetrack. An ideal camping spot! Protected in the birch forest, we have a wonderful view down to the river Bystraya about 20 m below us and to the untouched forests at the other side of the canyon. Wow, this is great. As we get water down at the river, we see the salmon moving up the river to their breeding grounds. Can we get one? That would make a great dinner. Our first attempts of fishing turned out to be unsuccessful, but as we are wading back to the riverbank one of the salmon moves in flat water, where we manage to catch it by hand. Amazing how strong they are – it is quite a struggle to finally throw it out of the water. A salmon of 60 cm in length for a 20 cm pan, what a great meal!

Tshebureky and Shashlik

At the village Apache we exit the narrow canyon of the Bistraya River and now have a view to the flat plains of the west coast. Since Ust Bolsherevsk is a forbidden town, we decide to stop our trip west here and now return in direction of Petropavlovsk. The remaining time we want to use to explore the volcano Avachinsky directly near Petropavlovsk, and the Mutnovsky to the south of Petropavlovsk. As we reach the asphalt street we are so happy that even the wind coming from eastern directions cannot slow us down.

In the small village Soratch a number of kiosk huts offer vodka, bread and other grocery items. Several women sell small hot meals from warm boxes to truck drivers. This is a great chance for us to try out some local meals. It is cheap anyway. It seems that many families earn some money by preparing hot potatoes, rolls filled with meat or vegetables (Tshebureky), or grilled meat (Shashlik). For us it is very funny to see how the insulated boxes are transported: they are put into old kid's strollers.

Back into civilization

Although we are now on paved road again, we still need to be very cautious. The surface is spotted with numerous holes and cracks; sometimes holes are so deep that we cannot see the end. If one hits such a hole, the trip can be over immediately. The closer we approach Jelizovo and Petropavlovsk, the more traffic there is, and the more we have to be careful not to be run-over as we try to avoid one of the deep holes in the asphalt surface. Bears, mosquitoes, or lack of water are no more the central problems we have to deal with, rather we now have to worry about finding a good camping spot, deal with drunk drivers, opening and closing times of stores and offices. However, we are rewarded by a great view to the volcanoes Koryaksky (3450 m) and Avachinsky (2740 m) which were hidden in clouds a few weeks ago when we had left Petropavlovsk. The climb of Avachinsky seems very easy, with the training we had at Tolbatschik. There even is a fairly decent trail up. Only the ride to the Avachinsky base camp was hard, through a washed-out riverbed.

Raspberries, Strawberries, and other local food

We now head south into the Paratunka valley, leading to Muntnovsky. Near the small town Nikolayevka we pass a farmer's market. Anything we can dream of is being sold here. Different species of berries of the forest, mushrooms, smoked fish, different vegetables from the garden, fresh milk and cream, cheese and yogurt. Even fresh meat is available. Although we are almost at the end of our bike tour, we fill our panniers again with delicious local food. The next two days we will travel only short distances, enjoy the scenic view of Mutnovsky, and spend a lot of time cooking big meals. This is a good way to end a bike trip, which had been strenuous and full of exciting adventures.