Kamchatka’s critters and craters

Comprehensive tour of Kamchatka, including cultural immersion, wildlife watching and hiking.

Destination
Kamchatka, Russia

Tour type
Group tour / Guaranteed departures

Travel season
July - September

Tour duration
15 days / 14 nights

Accommodation
Mixed (hotels, cabins, tents)

Group size
6-16 people

Min age
14 y.o.

Arrival/Departure
Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky

Action rating
Includes 6-8h hikes and long rides, involve up to 900m of ascent and descent. A fair fitness level is required to fully appreciate this tour.
KAMCHATKA. RUSSIA.

TOUR PROGRAM

Day 1  Arrival to Kamchatka
Day 2-4 Kurilskoye lake by helicopter, brown bears watching
Day 5  Flight over Mutnovsky volcano
Day 6  Optional Valley of Geysers and Uzon caldera tour
Day 7-9 Klyuchihevskoy Nature Park: Tolbachk volcano
Day 10-13 Esso village and reindeer herders
Day 14 Optional boat trip in Avacha Bay
Day 15 Departure
Walk among Kamchatka's giants – brown bears and active volcanoes; immerse yourself in the semi-nomad culture and explore wildlife-rich waters of the Pacific Ocean.

Kamchatka’s Critters and Carters tour will take place in the prime summer wildlife-viewing season, you’ll experience the incredibly rich of flora, fauna and geology of the region. The tour kicks off in spectacular style with a flight over the Ksudach volcano, followed by several days observing the salmon fishing bears of Kurilskoye Lake in the Kronotsky Reserve.

We plan a helicopter flight over the crater of Mutnovsky volcano before heading further north to see the new lava cones of Tolbachik volcano in Klyuchevskoy Nature Park – UNESCO heritage sight. We’ll also spend time in the settlement of Esso, staying overnight with nomadic reindeer herders in their summer camp in the mountains.

**DAY 1: WELCOME TO KAMCHATKA**

Arrive in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, the administrative, cultural and industrial centre of Kamchatka and home to around 180,000 people. It is a remote poor city with little infrastructure, in a dramatic and beautiful setting; built on a series of high hills on the Pacific harbour of Avachinskaya Bay, it’s surrounded by a chain of five towering volcanoes, two of which are still active.

From the airport, you’ll be transferred to your hotel in town, where you will take your time to relax and acclimatise. Meet a guide for a tour of Petropavlovsk, quick shopping for rubber boots and face mosquito net, and a short briefing on a tour ahead. You’ll be welcomed to Kamchatka this evening with a group dinner in a city restaurant.

Meals: D
Accommodation: 3* hotel in Petropavlovsk

**DAY 2: CHOPPER FLIGHT TO KURIL LAKE**

This morning our journey to the Kingdom of Brown Bears kicks into high gear, with a morning flight by MI-8 helicopter to Kurilskoye (Kuril) Lake, deep in the heart of brown bear country! One hour into our flight we’ll make a stopover at the Ksudach Volcano (if weather permits). We’ll take a walking excursion visiting the deep blue crater lake of Schtubelya, situated inside the volcano, and to a lovely waterfall where water cascades from the crater. Volcanic hot springs create a ‘hot beach’ on the lake’s shore, where it’s possible to take an invigorating swim.

Following your dip, our chopper flight continues the short distance to Kamchatka’s famed Kuril Lake. Our home for the next two nights is in a very basic but cosy wooden lodge. A wraparound deck affords a gorgeous view of the lake and surrounding mountains. It’s quite often possible to watch bears fishing along the lake’s edge without even leaving the grounds of the lodge! In the afternoon, you’ll have time to enjoy excursions along the lake’s pumice rock beach, where you’ll be briefed about the next day’s activities.

Meals: BLD
Accommodation: Basic wooden lodge
Hiking: Light walking excursions
DAYS 3-4: THE KINGDOM OF BROWN BEARS

Kuril Lake is without a doubt one of the best places on earth to spot and photograph brown bears in their natural habitat, so the next two days is devoted to observing these mighty mammals as they hunt the salmon that gather here in their millions during the summer months.

We’ll use a mix of motor boat and walking excursions with experienced local wardens in order to maximise our chances of seeing bears up-close and observing different behaviours. The bear viewing platform (250m from our lodge) is located at the mouth of the many rivers that drain into the lake, providing awesome opportunities to take Nat Geo worthy photos of the bears fishing for migrating salmon.

Our longer walking excursions will lead us to a lush summer meadow where the bears feed on wild berries and visit other spawning streams further from the lodge. Along these streams you’ll be able to see the spawning salmon in shallow water and many signs of the large number of birds in the area. There’s a good chance of spotting bears fishing only metres away as you walk along the banks of the streams.

Meals: BLD  
Accommodation: Basic wooden lodge  
Hiking: Light hiking excursions

DAY 5: KHODUTKA HOT SPRINGS

In the morning we’ll take a final stroll around Kurilskoye Lake and head up to the bear-viewing platform for a final opportunity to bag a prize-winning shot of the magnificent beasts in their element.

Our afternoon MI-8 helicopter flight will drop us off on the banks of the Khodutka River for a bathe in the thermal hot water springs – the largest in Kamchatka. The water bubbles out on to a section of tundra located just under the Khodutka Volcano, forming a small stream. Further from the source, the water slowly cools, so bathers are able to find a location where the temperature is just right for a warm, soothing swim.

We board the MI-8 once more for a flight over the crater of Mutnovsky volcano plateau, before heading back to city.

Meals: BLD  
Accommodation: 3* hotel in Petropavlovsk  
Hiking: Light hiking excursions

DAY 6: VALLEY OF GEYSERS

Today the choice is yours to either enjoy free day exploring Petropavlovsk at your leisure, or join an optional* scenic helicopter flight to the World Heritage site of the Valley of the Geysers and the crater of the mighty Uzon volcano.

The Valley of Geysers is the only geyser field in Eurasia and the second largest concentration of geysers in the world. This cluster of around 90 geysers, fumaroles and hot springs in this valley were only discovered in 1941. They lie above the marginal fractures of the oldest Uzon caldera and periodically expel hot water in spectacular jet streams.

The MI-8 helicopter will take you on a flight (about 1h 15min) over Karymskiy (active) volcano and Malyi Semyachik volcano with its spectacular acid crater lake, and finally will land in the
valley. The walking route (1h 30 min) goes along the wooden decking of the paths to the main observation points, from which you will see eruption of the biggest geysers, look into the “Gates to hell”, enjoy the views of the pots with boiling red clay.

After that, the helicopter will take you to Uzon Caldera (5-10min flight). During the excursion (40-50min) you will walk along the Eastern thermal field to observe moon landscapes and volcanic activity. From here, you will fly (40 min) to the beautiful Nalychevo Valley where you will have lunch and a relaxing soak in natural thermal pools. Don’t forget your swimmers! Another 20 min flight, and you will back to the heliport. Approximate tour duration is 6-7 hours, you’ll be back to the hotel at about 5:30pm.

* Please note that weather circumstances may change the day of excursion as to take advantage of good weather. It is possible for flights on a given day to be cancelled or delayed due to poor visibility, high winds, or precipitation somewhere along the route. It's possible that even if skies are sunny at the helicopter port, fog in the Valley can prevent landing.

Meals: BLD
Accommodation: 3* hotel in Petropavlovsk

**DAY 7: ON THE WAY TO VOLCANOES**

Today begins with a full day’s journey to a typical Russian village of Kozyrevsk. We’ll cover a total distance of appx 450km – the drive is on unsealed roads and takes roughly 8 to10 hours. Along the way we pass the old Cossack village of Milkovo where we stop for lunch and a stroll around the village to get a feel of typical Russian rural life.

From here we head further to the wilderness along the banks of the Kamchatka River, Kamchatka’s largest river, which runs northward through the central valley of the peninsula. On arrival to Kozyrevsk we will stay for overnight in very basic wooden cabins or tents (depending on weather). Enjoy real Siberian sauna (banya) and a stunning night starry sky.

Meals: BLD
Accommodation: wooden cabins or tents
Driving: 450km

**DAY 8: KLYUCHEVSKOY NATURE PARK**

Klyuchevskoy Nature Park was registered into the UNESCO World Cultural and Natural Heritage List in 1999. It covers an area of 376,000 ha with Eurasia’s most grand and active Klyuchevksaya group of volcanoes in its center. It consists of 13 volcanoes, including 4 active ones (Klyuchevskoy, Plosky Tolbachik, Besmyanny, Ushkovsky) and 9 extinct ones (Kamen, Krestovsky, Ostry Tolbachik, ovalnaya Zimina, ostraya Zimina, Bolshaya Udina, Malaya Udina, Sredny, and Gorny Zoub).

Travelling further 75 km, about 5h drive from where we stayed overnight, we arrive to our first base camp location on a slope of Tolbachik volcano plateau. After the camp is set up, we will enjoy walking along solid lava flows from the 2012-2013 eruption on a short 3km hike. Here you’ll have a chance to capture iconic images of crackling red liquid lava streams oozing around the freshly cooled black volcanic rock.

Meals: BLD
Accommodation: tents
Driving: 60km
Hiking: 3km
DAY 9: TOLBACHIK VOLCANO

Today we explore the "Dead Forest" – an area that was destroyed by enormous eruption between 1975 and 1976.

The territory around turned into a burnt desert, lakes and rivers disappeared, and the animals that had survived left the area for the best. Devoid of life, the ancient larch trees here are now eerie skeletons of their former selves, surrounded by a burnt desert landscape and set against the backdrop of the magnificent Tolbachik.

Meals: BLD
Accommodation: tents
Driving: 60km
Hiking: Light hiking excursions

DAY 10: ESSO VILLAGE

Be ready to jump to our 4/6wd truck as we are heading to Esso settlement in Central Kamchatka (route will take up to 7h). Here we will check into the hotel, finally take a hot shower and relax in the thermal pool.

Esso is a charming village of about 1,500 residents nestled in the Central Mt. Range and inside of the Bystrinsky Nature Park, the largest of the Volcanoes of Kamchatka’s Nature Parks. This village’s spectacular setting and unique population of Russians and Kamchatka aboriginal people welcomes visitors to a cozy accommodation, warmed by natural geothermal waters.

After rest in the hotel, enjoy a traditional folk performance and immerse yourself in the Koryak and Even people culture.

Meals: BLD
Transportation: 150km
Accommodation: tents

DAY 11-12: REINDEER HERDERS

After breakfast at the hotel, explore Esso’s surroundings or relax in the thermal pool. In the afternoon we will board a helicopter for a flight to the reindeer herders camp, where we will stay in tents for overnight. Here, we will visit their chums, the cone shaped, portable tents they call home, and experience a way of life that is now in danger of completely dying out. In the morning of day 12 we will fly back to the village of Esso, where we will stay for overnight.

Meals: BLD
Accommodation: 3* hotel in Esso

DAY 13: BACK TO CIVILIZATION

Having spent a week in the wilderness, it’s time for a brief return to civilization. We embark on a drive back to the city of Petropavlovsk. Along the way we’ll make another pit stop at Milkovo village. Retire for a well-earned rest at our hotel.

Meals: BLD
Transportation: 530km
Accommodation: 3* hotel in Petropavlovsk
DAY 14: OPTIONAL BOAT TRIP IN AVACHA BAY

An *optional boat trip (6 hours) out into the bay is a very relaxing way of gaining an alternative view of the splendid setting of Petropavlovsk and its dramatic volcanoes. Departing from a pier near the centre of town, the expanse of the hilly city soon falls into perspective. Further toward the middle of the bay, both Koryaksky and Avacha volcanoes come into view behind the city. When Avacha erupted in 1991, people living in Petropavlovsk could watch the red stream of lava coming down the slope towards the city, while hot ashes were shooting into the skies above the summit crater.

Near the mouth of the bay, the Three Brothers are tall finger-like sea stacks, whose rock faces rise vertically out of the water. The cliffs around the bay house many colonies of seabirds in their natural habitats, and puffins are commonly seen among many other types of seabird. Hot lunch is aboard.

This day, we also visit the Geology Museum with its spectacular photographs of most of the volcanoes. Specimens are labelled in Russian, so provide a fun identification challenge; don’t miss the huge mass of black sulphur (looking like dull basalt glass) that came from Bannoye Lake at Uzon.

Return to Petropavlovsk some time in the afternoon.

Meals: BLD
Accommodation: 3* hotel in Petropavlovsk

DAY 15: TIME TO SAY GOODBYE

Today marks our final day in the land of giants. After breakfast, you’ll be transferred to the airport. Hotel check out at 12pm, so please have it mind when planning your departure.

Meals: B

WHAT’S INCLUDED

• Group airport transfers
• Transportation on tour (coach, 4 or 6WD transport, helicopters, boats)
• Accommodation (twin share /double):
  o 3* hotel accommodation in Petropavlovsk (5 nights)
  o 3* hotel accommodation in Esso village (2 nights)
  o Wooden cabin on Kuril Lake (3 nights)
  o wooden cabins in Kozyrevsk (1 night)
  o base camp at the slope of Tolbachik volcano (2 nights)
  o base camp or yurta at reindeer herders camp (1 night)
• Camping equipment, except personal: sleeping bag, insulation mat, dishes
• Meals as specified: 14 breakfasts, 13 lunches, 14 dinners
• All experiences detailed in the itinerary, except optional
• Permits and Kronotsky Reserve fees, including photography fees
• Local professional English speaking guide
• Experienced drivers
• Chef and helper
• Russian visa support letter
NOT INCLUDED

- International flights
- Travel insurance
- Visa
- Optional tours
- Individual transfers
- Alcohol
- Tips

TO BE PAID ADDITIONALLY

- High rubber boots (are mandatory for Kuril Lake excursions) can be easily sourced when you arrive (approx. US $15)
- Sleeping bags can be hired for US $50 for the entire trip if needed
- Optional helicopter flight to the Valley of Geysers and Uzon Caldera on day 2 of your itinerary, RUB 37,000 / US $650
- Optional boat trip in Avacha Bay on day 14 of the itinerary, RUB 6,500 / US $120 *(check current exchange rate)

ESSENTIAL INFO

Accommodation

During this trip the group will spend 5 nights in hotel accommodation in Petropavlovsk and 2 nights in a hotel in Esso village. On Kurilskoye Lake the group will stay in a basic 2-storey wooden lodge on a Grassy Point (the only accommodation available in the area). The lodge offers bunk beds accommodation with 8 people in a room, 1 room on each floor. There will be a common kitchen and a bathroom with limited hot water, from 7 to 11pm.

During your stay in the base camps, you’ll be supplied with VauDe Campo and Galaxy III tents, which you will share with another traveller. The tents are mosquito proof and it takes just few minutes to set up a tent. Rent-a-tent is included in a trip price. But if you have a good tent and prefer to use your own then you should take your own. A big “kitchen” tent, camping furniture (table and chairs) and cutlery also will be provided.

All accommodation except on Kuril lake is on a twin sharing basis. If you are travelling by yourself you will be paired up with another single client of the same sex. It is possible to hire a single tent on this tour for an additional cost. Depending on availability, it is also normally possible to book a single room for the hotel in Petropavlovsk and Esso.

Additional hotel nights before or after the tour can be arranged in Petropavlovsk (subject to availability). For hotel prices and single supplement costs please contact your travel specialist at 56th Parallel. Hotels are subject to availability and prices may vary.

Food

Kamchatka is famous for its seafood, which always forms a part of a menu. Seafood here is abundant, fresh and exotic, you’ll have a chance to enjoy fresh caviar and King Crabs, try a hearty salmon ukha (poacher’s broth), made from fresh fish with cinnamon, cloves and pepper and simmered over an open fire. Of course there are plenty of very affordable treats like blini
(small pancakes filled with caviar, fish, melted butter or sour cream) or aladyi (crumpets with the same filling or jam). Try some berries in your shot of vodka and enjoy local beer.

The food during camping days will be a mix of local and international dishes, made from locally sourced ingredients.

We cater for vegetarians. Upon booking the tour, you will fill in the booking form, where you should indicate your food preferences and any dietary restrictions.

Climate

Kamchatka’s climate is as diverse as its flora and fauna. The peninsula experiences the four seasons of the northern hemisphere with warm summers and cool winters but there are as many as 20 distinct climatic zones which vary not only according to latitude but also proximity to the sea and even geo-thermal activity. All this makes temperature and rainfall very hard to predict.

You can expect daytime temperatures to be in the region of +10 to +25 C, whilst overnight at our highest camps the temperature may drop slightly below freezing, to -5C. It can be humid in some areas of Kamchatka, which occurs lots of mosquitos. During your stay you can expect showers and even light snow (in the mountains).

Action rating

Outside of the main township, there are very few sealed roads in Kamchatka. We use a heavy-duty 4 or 6WD trucks for getting around the rough gravel and dirt tracks into Kamchatka’s volcanic region. Be prepared for a bumpy and not very comfortable long rides.

The walks on this tour may be approximately generalized to be of grades B and C, with the definitions as follows:

Grade B: Moderately easy for those of good fitness level and who are able to traverse moderately hill. Walking is limited to day excursions from a central location to which you will be transported. These day hikes are normally no more than 6 hours in duration and all walking may be done with a light daypack.

Grade C: Strenuous and requires a higher level of physical fitness. Make sure you are able to hike 6-10km a day. You should be prepared for several consecutive days of walking, sometimes at higher altitudes, so stamina is important.

Safety

Kamchatka can be a dangerous place if you go wandering off alone. There are plenty of bears around and the group will need to be vigilant. We don’t anticipate any problems as the bears tend to keep to themselves, but just in case, we will be escorted by a park ranger. He will prioritise our safety at all times, leaving the group to focus on enjoying wildlife and photography. We’ll give you a full safety briefing before the trip starts, and recommend that you stick together in small groups.

Local tour leaders

56th Parallel employs local Russian tour leaders, guides and drivers. This way, we’re able to provide much-needed jobs within Russia’s fledgling tourism industry, while our guests benefit from our guides’ intimate knowledge of the regions we visit. All our key staff is English speaking,
and we absolutely encourage you to engage them with your questions and cultural comparisons. A great rapport with your tour leader goes a long way to making your holiday experience truly memorable.

Additional info

Please note that travel around Kamchatka is very dependent on the weather, so be prepared to be flexible. It’s a wild and remote place, with very poor and limited infrastructure, so you need to be prepared for rough conditions such as drop toilets, rubbish and stretched facilities.

FAQ’s

How to get to Kamchatka?

Sandwiched between sub-Arctic Russia and the Pacific Ocean, Kamchatka has no overland routes leading into the region. There are no regular passenger ferries to anywhere in Kamchatka, so the only practical way for travellers to arrive is by air. The airport is located 20km from Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky in the village of Elizovo. The easiest ways to get to Kamchatka are following:

• **From Europe:** There are daily overnight flights from Moscow (nine hours), and several flights a week from St Petersburg. These flights operated by Aeroflot (the best Russian air company).

• **From Asia, Australia and New Zealand:** You can get to Kamchatka from China, Hong Kong and South Korea via other Russian cities such as: Khabarovsk, Novosibirsk and Vladivostok. You can find these flights either with Asian companies, or Russian one – S7 airlines.

Seasonally, some direct flights are available once a week from Tokyo (Narita), operated by Yakutia Airlines.

• **From USA and Canada:** In peak summer season July-September there are occasional flights from Anchorage (Alaska), one a week, operated by Yakutia Airlines.

Will I definitely see the bears?

There are no guarantees, because we have no control over either the weather or the wildlife. Even after many years of travelling to Kamchatka we can never predict exactly what we will see. But that is all part of the fun! Nevertheless, we put a great deal of time and experience into identifying the best locations, and the best time of the year, to maximize our chances of enjoying wildlife. Kurilskoye Lake is one of the best places in Kamchatka for brown bears watching, where hundreds of bears come to the lake for fishing and playing.

What is average age of the participants?

Most of our guests are 30s - 60s+, but some participants are in their teens and many are in their 70s or 80s. If you are young at heart, and are in reasonably good health, you will be able to enjoy this tour. However, it is worth checking with your doctor first, if you have any medical conditions.
What if I don’t want to share a room and a tent?

The tour price is based on two people of the same gender sharing a room. If you are traveling alone, you can either share with another member of the group of the same gender (if there is someone available and willing to share), or you can secure a room to yourself by paying additional fees for single supplement. Please note on this tour only hotels and base camp single accommodation is available. On Kurilskoye Lake you’ll have to stay in a room with 8 other people.

REQUIREMENTS

Russian tourist visa

Almost all foreigners are required to obtain a Russian tourist visa, which entitles you to a maximum of 30 days of staying in Russia from date of entry. Upon booking a tour, you’ll be provided with Russian tourist visa support document (invitation letter/voucher), which you should use to apply for a visa.

Travel insurance

Medical travel insurance is essential. It’s extremely important that your chosen policy covers all aspects of the trip you’re undertaking, including cancelations. We recommend contacting your insurance provider for advice if you’re not sure which policy to take out.

Passport

Make sure your passport is valid for at least 6 months after your departure date from Russia, or you can be denied to enter Russia.

BOOKING A TOUR

How to book

To book a tour and secure your place, please email to info@56thparallel.com. You’ll be asked to complete the booking forms and provide your passport copy. Once we get your enquiry we will reserve your spot in the group for 10 business days. This should be enough time for you to complete the forms and pay a deposit.

Terms of payment

A deposit of 25% of the tour price must be paid to secure your place. The deposit is non-refundable unless you can sell your place to someone else. The remaining balance of 75% must be paid not later than 30 business days before departure.
Cancellation policy

A written notice of any cancellation must be received from you at which time the following cancellation fees will apply. See our Terms and Conditions for detailed information.

Disclaimer

All information here is provided in good faith and has been compiled with all reasonable care. However, our itineraries and accommodation sometimes have to be adjusted according to booking availabilities, weather conditions and other factors. Prices are subject to confirmation at the time of booking due to exchange rates and other cost factors.

We do our best to keep all the information on our website and information kits up-to-date, but please be aware that things can change at the last minute. We encourage you to contact our customer service team if there’s anything you need to be sure of – we are always happy to help!

If you need to make sure that your needs are covered by this itinerary and if you have special interests, requirements or expectations, please consult with your travel specialist upon booking a tour, so your expectations meet the reality.

If you have any questions or require more info call us on +61-2-9388-98-16 or email to info@56thparallel.com