

## Walking on the Wild Side - of Russia

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Travelogue

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When I was first given the opportunity to visit the Altai Republic my initial thought was probably the same as most other people - where on Earth is that?

Close scrutiny of an atlas didn't leave me much the wiser, but since it was April and I was to travel there in August with **Biosphere Expeditions** it was time to start doing some research.

Rummaging through libraries and bookshops eventually pinpointed it to the south-eastern fringes of Russia in an area bordering Mongolia, China, Kazakhstan, and Tuva. Ah, much clearer then.

Four hours flight and an hour's drive south-east from Moscow, the Altai established semi-autonomous status in 1997 although, as we discovered, Kremlin officials do make it out to this hinterland; we were barred from taking lunch at a café in the wilderness because an official had got there first. About 60% of the populace (some 200,000 people) are Russian, with native Altaians making up most of the rest. Almost everyone has a distinctive Central Asian or Mongolian appearance: dark eyes, dark hair, sun-browned skin.

The region has a history of nomadic culture, and although this may be in decline as modern times inch their way into the Altai, it was still possible to see this way of life. Herders on the open plains with their sheep and goats spending the short summer season in warm, transportable yurts were a regular sight.



With an average population density of two people per square kilometre, the beautiful steppe scenery is unspoilt, despite proposed developments such as a road link with Tuva that will open the area up. The varied terrain, ranging from semi-desert to tundra, glaciated valleys to lakes, forests to endless open steppe, supports a rich variety of wildlife, much of it scarce, and localised to central Asia.

One such case is the snow leopard (*Uncia uncia*), one of the world's eight big cats. It is also one of the most elusive, with a preference for high, rocky mountains, and an almost preternatural ability to blend in with this background. Its strongholds are Tibet and China, but its range is patchy and numbers are uncertain, with pessimistic estimates suggesting that as few as 4,500 remain in the wild. Snow leopards are threatened in a number of ways, including conflicts with herders, dwindling of prey animals, habitat loss and illegal poaching. They are still reported from most of the Central Asian republics including the Altai, and they were the reason we had come here as volunteers with Biosphere Expeditions.

Biosphere has been operating in this part of the world for three years now, seeking to increase knowledge of the snow leopard and major prey species, in what is an unprotected corridor between populations in Mongolia and Russia. Biosphere's mission is to 'promote sustainable conservation and preservation of the planet's wildlife by forging alliances between scientists and the public.' For the purposes of the this trip, I and several other keen volunteers were acting as 'the public' under the supervision of UK-based and local expert scientists, mountain guides, and support staff

support staff.

On our trip there were 12 volunteers who came from all over the world and from a variety of backgrounds. Ages ranged from 24 to 74. Basically, we were there to have the holiday of a lifetime, made even more satisfying by the knowledge that we were contributing to a invaluable conservation cause.

So what was it like to be on one of these trips? Well, to start off with, it was pretty active, and I did more concentrated walking than I'd ever done before. Which is not to say you need to be a top mountaineer, but the fitter you are, the more complete the experience. However, everyone was allowed to do as much or as little as befitted their capabilities.

Of the ten days on site, five were spent hiking up into remote valleys (staggering up in my case), beyond the tree-line, through thick slabs of rock and scree, and meadows filled with blue gentians. All of the walking trips were led by experienced mountain guides who were able to pick out trails the you might not even see, let alone decide to follow. Each trip saw several members kitted out with GPS and binoculars, and everyone had waterproofs, hats and fresh drinking water from the local streams. The well prepared (yours truly) snatched a large chocolate bar from the breakfast table too.

However, despite all the exertions - those chocolate bars were heavy! - Biosphere were at pains to point out that this was not a 'military boot camp'. There were opportunities to take tea with local herders in their yurts. Here there was also the chance to sample some vodka, and then some more vodka, except for those of us driving the Land Rovers. The families we visited were always warm and friendly and we never left hungry.

We went on cross-country drives to reach ancient monuments, lakes teeming with wildfowl, and hurtled across the plains viewing nocturnal wildlife. There was even a party day at base camp, dancing to whatever tunes were big in Russia at the time (we endured Peter Andre).



Considering that the camp is 50km from the nearest civilisation, the food was pretty amazing. Nadia, our student cook, did wonderful things with a very limited set of cooking facilities, and truthfully I can say that I enjoyed more food in the mess tent than I ever would eat at home.

Everything here was under canvas, and for sleeping options there was a mix of both single and double tents. Not surprisingly the nature of the washing (cold or lukewarm shower tents) and sanitation (long drop) facilities was somewhat less than five star. The nights were cold and snow not unusual, so a roaring camp fire was a welcome boost, as everyone huddled into their coats and drank beer or vodka. Are you spotting a theme yet?



And the wildlife? Well, we didn't expect snow leopards gamboling around the camp. Sure enough, they weren't. Snow leopards blend seamlessly into their rocky background. Unfit Englishmen with a green hats do not. Put the two together and you have nil sightings: though even professionals rarely get lucky. Ibex and argali (mountain sheep), are seen every summer, but far more regular is the sign of their passage in the forms of droppings (any

carnivore droppings were dutifully picked up and bagged) and hoof prints. Evidence of wild boar was everywhere in the tussocky scrub, but for large creatures they were surprisingly elusive. Wolf, bear and lynx all occur, but are rare. So, basically, we could forget the notion of an African safari with animals parading in front of the four-wheel drive. Here you had to look hard for them. What we did see were lots of smaller critters like mink, marmot and pikas. Large birds such as eagles and cranes were around on the steppe, and grasshoppers and butterflies bountiful. The whole

area was swathed in wild flowers - a botanists dream.

If that doesn't convince you that the Russian steppe is your cup of tea then Biosphere offer a number of other opportunities. Cheetahs in Namibia, wolves in Europe, dolphins in the Azores, parrots in Peru. Whatever takes your fancy, in fact. My advice is get out there, enjoy it, and enjoy helping it stay that way.