

EPISODE TWO

I wake to the sound of lowing cattle. Slept well but was chilly. One thing that hasn't changed since I was last in Russia is the width of the bed sheets...a little wider than the human body but a little narrower than the bed. You tend to wake up like a badly wrapped mummy, with the sheets all coiled around you!

To Breakfast. No sooner have I poked my head round the door of the dining room than I'm met by Igor, our guide who thrusts a spoonful of fresh raspberries into my mouth.

"Tradition!" he shouts "Start the day with a raspberry!"

Peels of laughter and great satisfaction at my lack of comprehension. Igor is also very satisfied with the weather, for today we are to visit the Kronotsky Nature Reserve. It covers one and a half million hectares and the only way in is by helicopter.

We drive to the nearby airstrip where there is quite a crowd waiting by the helicopter. It feels like a family outing.

Take off is a long laborious process but once in the air all is magical. We leave behind the low hills and run north alongside the Pacific climbing slowly to the snowline that rings a spectacular volcano. Quite suddenly we are up over its rim and looking down onto the most enormous, beautiful, turquoise blue lake. Sergei tells us that there are twenty five volcanoes within the reserve, twelve of which are active.

We touch down on a dormant crater and Sergei leads us past a sub-lunar landscape of bleached white quicksand. We are given a lecture on the perils of straying from the track.. But life survives even in the hottest part of this great oozing stew. Sergei shows me a translucent almost jellyfish – like plant, trailing fine white tentacles, which grows around holes from which water flows at a constant temperature of 90% centigrade. It is unique to this reserve.

A spectacular thermal display is on offer in the nearby Valley of the Geysers. This valley consists of a series of fissures through which steaming hot water emerges in various ways. You can almost set your watch by the great spout they call The Giant. This shoots a plume of boiling water almost 100 feet high, once every three hours.

Sergei, having carefully checked his watch, leads me right up to the blowhole. I peer down 35 foot into the earth's crust. An ominous bronchial wheezing rises from the darkness, as if the earth itself is not at all well.

A path leads along by the river to a gorge, one whole side of which is punctured by dozens of horizontal geysers. Some spurt neatly out over the river, others wildly loose off in all directions. The entire 200 foot cliff emits a great wheezing chorus of steam which reminds me of Kings Cross Station in the 1950's.

Nothing is safe and sound and settled here; the earth seems to be in perpetual motion. This is nature at its most extravagant, melodramatic and bizarre.

Our day in the nature reserve ends at a woodman's hut—where we eat rich salmon stew and the mosquitoes eat us.