

# Russian Far East

## Дальний Восток

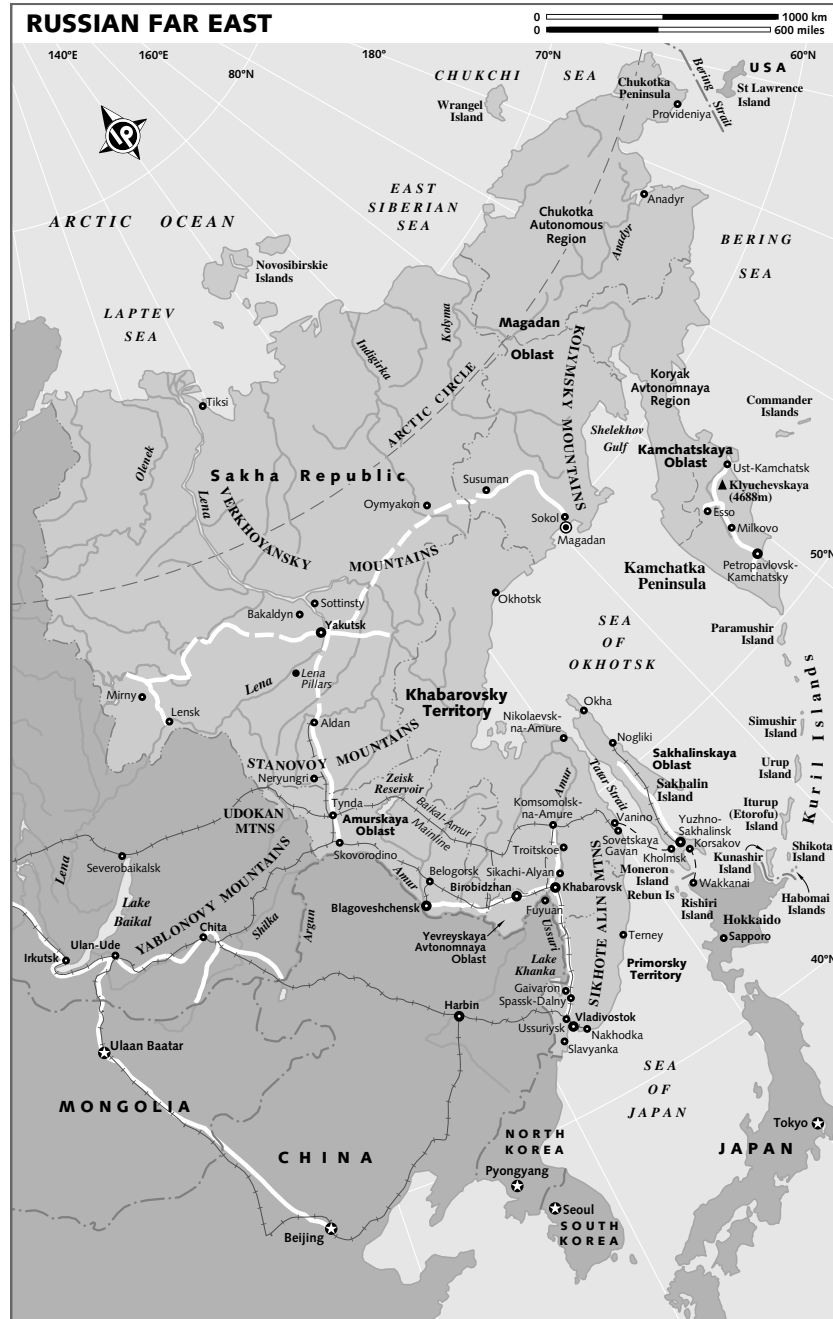
Commonly mistaken for 'Siberia', the Russian Far East is actually further from Moscow, more remote and colder. It's also pretty big. Larger than Europe, it is comprised of taiga forest, snow-splattered or forested mountains, and northward rivers. Few foreigners make it here. Even trans-Siberian goes usually cut south from Baikal to Mongolia, missing the Far East entirely. There's a lot of thrillingly untouched turf though, with great (often costly) options for hiking, rafting, cross-country skiing, dog sledding and fishing. Best are encounters – on streets, in train carriages – with locals who may be surprised you made it here at all.

The southern strips of towns run along the eastern stretches of the pan-Russian trans-Siberian and BAM railways. The former sees more life, as it reaches the region's cosmopolitan leaders Khabarovsk and Vladivostok, both with tsarist-era buildings and sushi. The BAM is a gritty Soviet effort to connect Russia with some purpose-built '70s wasteland towns and more appealing, tsar-styled communist creations like Komsomolsk-na-Amure. Across the Tatar Strait is oil-booming Sakhalin Island and the Kuril Islands, still claimed by Japan.

Up north, beyond train tracks or reasonable roads, surprising Yakutsk is the heart of Russia's largest political division: Sakha Republic, home to many Yakut people (and a lot of horse meat on menus). The rugged 'Kolyma Highway' leads a couple of thousand kilometres over mountains and marsh to Magadan, a Gulag-built town overlooking the Sea of Okhotsk. Dangling towards Alaska, the Kamchatka Peninsula is simply one of the world's most beautiful places. Dotted with smoking volcanoes, fields of hardened lava and bear tracks, much of Kamchatka requires some money and a tour to reach.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore one of Russia's great natural highlights, **Kamchatka** (p642), a rugged paradise of volcanoes, geysers and bear hangouts
- Travel to the isolated home of the Yakut, **Yakutsk** (p627), a city on stilts above the permafrost, with a thrilling Yakut festival
- Experience bustling **Khabarovsk** (p607), an Amur River city on the Trans-Siberian Railway, with its European-style centre and the region's best museum
- Ride the funicular railway in **Vladivostok** (p614) to get a great view of the city's snaking bays and Russia's Pacific Fleet
- Visit Russia's 'Gateway to Hell', **Magadan** (p632), a Sea of Okhotsk town set amidst mountains with great whale-watching opportunities



## History

The Far East is Russia's 'wild east,' where hardened Cossacks in the early 17th century – and young Soviets (and Gulag prisoners) in the 20th – came to exploit the region's untapped natural resources – such as gold of the Kolyma, diamonds of Sakha and oil off Sakhalin. Russian explorers and plunderers even leapfrogged from the Pacific coast and Kamchatka to stake claims on parts of what is today the USA (p42).

Much ado locally is made about Anton Chekhov's (occasionally whoring) trip through the Far East to Sakhalin in 1890. WWII gets much tribute in regional museums, but so does the Russo-Japanese War, which humiliated Russia and ended with Japan taking the southern half of Sakhalin Island in 1905 (p47); the USSR got it back after WWII. China and the USSR had their diplomatic burps too, like outright battling over a worthless river island near Khabarovsk in 1969.

In June 2005 Russia and China finally settled a four-decade dispute over their 4300km border by splitting 50–50 the Bolshoy Ussuryysky and Tarabarov Islands near the junction of the Amur and Ussuri Rivers, outside Khabarovsk.

## Climate

As in most of Russia, thermometers go as far below zero as above. Winters are cold of course – Sakha Republic is home to the world's coldest inhabited town (Oymyakon, which hits  $-50^{\circ}\text{C}$  in January). The sea brings warmer temperatures in winter, cooler in summer – Vladivostok and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky drop to only  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$ , and rarely go above the 20s in summer (fog often fills in though). Khabarovsk, the sunniest town in the Far East, is also the hottest – temperatures sometimes reach the mid-30s in July.

## Getting There & Away

The airports at Khabarovsk, Vladivostok and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk have international connections with China, Korea and Japan, while Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky has a weekly flight to/from Anchorage, Alaska. Other than direct flights (connecting most cities listed here with Moscow, St Petersburg, Novosibirsk or Krasnoyarsk), the train is the easiest way into the region. The trans-Siberian runs near the Chinese

border; the eastern BAM cuts through the taiga north of Lake Baikal – both reach port towns on the coast.

## Getting Around

A host of local airlines (eg Sibir Airlines, Vladivostok Airlines and Domodedovo) connect many of the towns within the region, though trains are always cheaper. Booking trips while outside Russia is very difficult. Some less frequent routes (such as flights to Magadan or Yakutsk) are sometimes delayed to get more butts in the seats. Aside from the train, vans or 4WD or 6WD vehicles can get you further out. See regional Getting There & Away sections for more details.

# EASTERN TRANS-SIBERIAN

Running from south of Lake Baikal, the eastern stretch of the famed trans-Siberian mostly flattens east of the Yablonovy Mountains before reaching Khabarovsk and turning south into the mountains of Primorsky Territory and on to the lovely naval port Vladivostok.

## BLAGOVESHCHENSK БЛАГОВЕЩЕНСК

☎ 4162 / pop 210,000 / 📍 Moscow +6hr

About 110km south of the trans-Siberian tracks, where Chinese and Russians rub shoulders, is Blagoveshchensk, a city set on the wide Amur River across from the Chinese town of Heihe. Since opening as a free trade zone in 1994, folks from either side swish-swash across the border (Russians for cheaper goods, Chinese for jobs – at lower wages than Russians). Blagoveshchensk (meaning 'good news') is less for tourism than business or gambling, but it's interesting watching Chinese tourists posing in front of tsar-era European buildings and statues of Lenin.

Settled as Ust-Zaysk military post in 1644, by the late 19th century Blagoveshchensk was outdoing Vladivostok or Khabarovsk in Sino-Russian commerce. However in 1900 Cossacks, seeking to avenge European deaths in the Chinese Boxer Rebellion, slaughtered thousands of Chinese people in the city. During the years of the Cultural

Revolution, citizens of Blagoveshchensk dealt with 24-hour propaganda blasted from loudspeakers across the river.

## Orientation & Information

The train station is 4km north of the river. The main cross-town artery is north-south ul 50 Let Oktyabrya, which meets pl Lenina (and east-west ul Lenina) a block from the river. Another key hub of action is a few blocks north at the corner of ul 50 Let Oktyabrya and ul Amurskaya.

**Amur Tourist** (☎ 53005; tour@amur.ru; ul Kuzhnechnaya 1; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-5pm) Caters to Russians and Chinese, but may help you with regional advice.  
**Internet Access** (☎ 391 276; ul Lenina 142; per hr R36; 🕒 9am-1pm & 2-8.30pm) Second floor of century-old red building, about 1km west of pl Lenina.

## Sights

Central **plshchad Lenina** – with Lenin's bronze self, fountains and promenade leading along the river in both directions – is a sort of beer-drinking focal point in good weather.

About 500m west on tree-lined ul Lenina, the large and well laid-out **Amur Regional Museum** (Amursky Oblastnoi Kraevedchesky muzey; ☎ 422 414; ul Lenina 165; admission R80; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is in a smartly kept red building dating from the turn of the 20th century.

Just south, around the WWII-themed **plshchad Pobody** (a block south of ul Lenina), you can see several prerevolutionary buildings in their faded glory. Look for the **Anton Chekhov bust** on the red building on the square's south side – he stayed here in 1890 on his way to Sakhalin.

Many 100-year-old wooden buildings – some rather dilapidated – offer a break from the modern block housing seen in much of the Far East.

## Sleeping & Eating

Most restaurants – found along ul Lenina – surrender to the temptation of the karaoke mic or slot machines: *pa-ching*.

**Druzhba Hotel** (☎ 376 140, 534 789; www.hotel.druzhba.ru, in Russian; ul Kuzhnechnaya 1; s/d R650/800-1000) About 600m east of pl Lenina, this riverside Soviet survivor is the town's best, with friendly service and clean basic rooms – many of which get full-frontal views of China.

**Zeya Hotel** (☎ 539 996; hotel\_zeia@amur.ru; ul Lenina 122; r per person from R744) Grey high-rise with clean rooms, just west of pl Pobody.

**Russkaya Izba** (☎ 446 661; ul Lenina 48; meals around R250-350; 🕒 11am-11pm) Tiny (four tables) and dachalike (with samovars and engraved wood details – and no gambling!), the homy Izba cooks up good Russian meals. It's about 800m east of the Druzhba.

## Getting There & Away

Blagoveshchensk is 110km off the trans-Siberian, on a branch line from Belogorsk (where taxi vans also meet oncoming trains for the two-hour ride; R150).

From the Blagoveshchensk train station, daily trains 185/186 lead to/from Vladivostok, passing through Khabarovsk (R1090, 16 hours). On odd-numbered days, trains 249/250 connect Blagoveshchensk with Moscow, stopping in Irkutsk (R2500, 53 hours); and trains 81/82 go to/from Tynda (R1260, 20 hours).

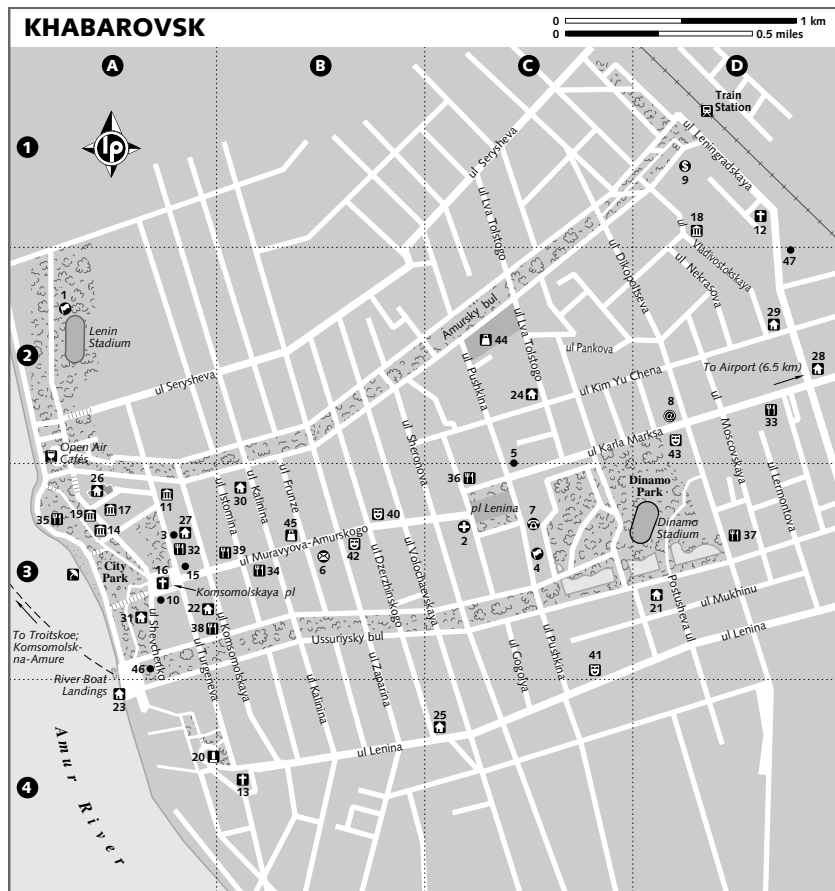
The wild **Passazhirskoe Port Amurasso** (☎ 440 703, 555 754; ul Chaykovskogo 1), about 500m east of the Druzhba, sends teams of bag-toting Chinese and Russians on four daily boats to Heihe, China (R600, 15 minutes); five boats make the return trip. You'll need a Chinese visa and a multientry Russian one if you plan on coming back. The nearest consulate is in **Khabarovsk** (Map p608; ☎ 4212-302 519; fax 328 390; Lenin Stadium 1); visa applications are taken from 10.30am to 1pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday. A visa can be arranged in a day for about R4200 or in a week for R2400. We hear it's quite hectic on the Chinese side. Be sure to fill out a yellow form for entry, or a blue one for exit. If you're coming back to Russia, you may have to insist on a migration card.

## KHABAROVSK ХАБАРОВСК

☎ 4212 / pop 620,000 / 📍 Moscow +7hr

After dozens of hours of taiga and the isolated Soviet towns of eastern Siberia, Khabarovsk can put a jolt in the most rail weary. A booming river town 25km from China, Khabarovsk gives off an air of a coastal, almost Mediterranean, resort with tree-lined streets, squares with fountains, 19th-century brick buildings, popular parks overlooking the wide Amur, and real Japanese sushi, imported here to serve the frequent Japanese business travellers.

Such business has brought in hope and money to locals – and prices show it. One Khabarovsk resident told us it's brought a



'baby boom' too: 'just look around, half the women are pregnant!'

If you stop for just a day, try to take in the Regional History Museum, the best in the Far East.

## History

Khabarovsk was founded in 1858 as a military post by eastern Siberia's governor general, Count Nikolai Muravyov (later Muravyov-Amursky), during his campaign to take the Amur back from the Manchus. It was named after the man who got the Russians into trouble with the Manchus in the first place, 17th-century Russian explorer Yerofey Khabarov.

The trans-Siberian rail line arrived from Vladivostok in 1897. During the Russian

Civil War, the town was occupied by Japanese troops for most of 1920. The final Bolshevik victory in the Far East was at Volochaevka, 45km to the west.

In 1969 Soviet and Chinese soldiers fought a bloody hand-to-hand battle over little Damansky Island in the Ussuri River. Since 1984, tensions have eased. Damansky and several other islands were handed back to the Chinese in 1991.

The Japanese are also back – this time for business and pleasure. They make up 80% of all foreign visitors here.

Eighty per cent of Khabarovskians are native Russian-speakers. The only indigenous people here in any number are the Nanai, whose capital is Troitskoe, three hours north on the Amur.

## INFORMATION

Chinese Consulate	Китайское Консульство	1	A2
City Hospital No 2	Городская больница номер 2	2	C3
Exchange Bureau	Дальгео Турыс Далгео Тур	3	A3
Internet Mir Интернет Мир	Интернет Мир	(see 6)	
Intour-Khabarovsk	Интур-Хабаровск	(see 26)	
Japanese Consulate	Японское Консульство	4	C3
Khabarovsk-Tourist	Хабаровск-Турист	(see 28)	
Knizhny Mir Книжный Мир	Книжный Мир	5	C2
Main Post Office Главпочтамт	Главпочтамт	6	B3
Main Telephone Office	Центральный Переговорный	7	C3
Punkt	Пункт	8	D2
Sberbank Сбербанк	Сбербанк	9	D1

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Amur Steamship Company	Пароходная Компания Амур	10	A3
Archeology Museum	Музей Археологии	11	A3
Church of Christ's Birth	Христорождественская Церковь	12	D1
Church of the Transfiguration	Преображенская церковь	13	B4
Duma Дума	Дума	(see 45)	

Far Eastern Art Museum	Дальневосточный Художественный Музей	14	A3
Far Eastern State Research Library	Библиотека Дальне-Восточного Исследования	15	A3
Khram Uspeniya Vozhey Materi	Храм Успения Божей Матери	16	A3
Military Museum Военный Музей	Музей Истории Дальневосточной Железной дороги	18	D1
Regional History Museum	Краеведческий Музей	19	A3
Tower	Торговая башня	(see 35)	
Tsentralny Gastronom	Центральный Гастроном	(see 39)	
WWII Memorial Памятник	Памятник Второй Мировой Войны	20	A4

## SLEEPING

Ali Hotel Гостиница Али	Али	21	D3
Ekspres Vostok Экспресс Восток	Экспресс Восток	22	A3
Gostinitsa Gostinitsa	Гостиница Гостиница	23	A4
Hotel Amethyst	Гостиница Аметист	24	C2
Hotel Amur Гостиница Амур	Гостиница Амур	25	C4
Hotel Intourist	Гостиница Интурист	26	A3
Hotel Sapporo Гостиница Саппоро	Гостиница Саппоро	27	A3
Hotel Turist Гостиница Турист	Гостиница Турист	28	D2
Hotel Zarya Гостиница Заря	Гостиница Заря	29	D2
Maly Hotel Гостиница Малая	Гостиница Малая	30	B3
Parus Парус	Парус	31	A3

## EATING

Chocolate Шоколад	Шоколад	32	A3
Citi HK Supermarket	Сити ХК Супермаркет	33	D2
Dalny Vostok Cafe	Дальний Восток Кафе	34	B3
Kafe Utos Кафе Утёс	Кафе Утёс	35	A3
Maly Hotel Restaurant	Малый Отель Ресторан	(see 30)	
Metro Метро	Метро	36	C3
Overtime	Овертайм	37	D3
Russky Restaurant	Русский Ресторан	38	A3
Tsentralnaya Gastronom	Центральный Гастроном	39	B3
Unikhab	Уникхэб	(see 26)	

## ENTERTAINMENT

Drama Theatre Театр Драмы	Драма Театр	40	B3
Rio	Рио	41	C3
SovKino СовКино	СовКино	42	B3
Theatre of Musical Comedy	Театр Музыкальной Комедии	43	D2

## SHOPPING

Market Рынок	Рынок	44	C2
Tainy Remesla Тайны Ремесла	Тайны Ремесла	45	B3

## TRANSPORT

Boat Ticket Office	Касса Судовых Билетов	46	A3
Train Ticket Office	Касса Железнодорожных Билетов	47	D2
Transport Service Transit	Транспортная Служба	(see 33)	

## Orientation

Khabarovsk's train station is about 3.5km northeast of the Amur waterfront at the head of broad Amursky bul; the airport is 9km east of the centre. Running more or less perpendicular to the river is the busiest street, ul Muravyova-Amurskogo, which becomes ul Karla Marksa east of pl Lenina.

## MAPS

**Knizhny Mir** (☎ 328 250; ul Karla Marksa 37; ☎ 9am-8pm) stocks a good range of city and regional maps for the entire Russian Far East (city maps are about R50).

## Information

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Internet Mir** (☎ 304 613; ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 28; per hr R40; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat & Sun) Web access, next to post office.

**P@RTY** (☎ 308 350; ul Karla Marksa 52; per hr R30; ☎ 10am-8pm) Rather un festive actually.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**City Hospital No 2** (☎ 306 585, 304 620; ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 54)

### MONEY

Exchange offices and ATMs can be found across the city.

**Exchange bureau** (Hotel Intourist; Amursky bul 2; ☎ 8.45am-11pm) Changes travellers cheques.

**Sberbank** (Amursky bul 66; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon & Wed-Fri, 9am-8pm Tue, 9am-7pm Sat & Sun) With 24-hour ATM, across from the train station.

### POST

**Main post office** (ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 28; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat & Sun) You can make calls from here or the centre just below.

### TELEPHONE

**Main telephone office** (ul Pushkina 52; ☎ 8.30am-10pm)

### TRAVEL AGENCIES

Any of the following can help book rail or plane tickets. Popular city tours incorporate beer-included peeks at the Baltika brewery (US\$40 per person) or Russian cuisine classes with dinner (about US\$60 per person).

**Dalgeo Tours** (☎ 318 829; www.dalgeotours.com; ul Turgeneva 78; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri) Very helpful English-speaking staff offer a range of local tours.

**Intour-Khabarovsk** (☎ 312 186; fax 327 634; www.intour-khabarovsk.com; Hotel Intourist, Amursky bul 2; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri) Mostly staff have plenty of experience with foreigners (friendly prebooked group tours).

**Khabarovsk-Tourist** (☎ 439 423; ul Sinelnikova 9, Hotel Turist; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) Arranges Chinese visas in a week for R2400, or in a day for R4500.



## Sights & Activities

### ULITSA MURAVYOVA-AMURSKOGO

Khabarovsk is the nicest city in the region to see by foot. A stroll along ul Muravyova-Amurskogo provides a chance to admire the graceful architecture that survived the civil war. The pretty fountains at pl Lenina are a magnet for locals relaxing in the evening, where Lenin still looks down from the front of a handsome 1903 red-brick building. During January, the square hosts an ice sculpture fest.

The striking old parliament building, or **duma** (ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 17), became the House of Pioneers (Dom Pionerov) in Soviet times. It now houses a souvenir shop called Tainy Remesla.

A statue of Mercury tops **Tsentralny Gas-tromom** (ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 9), a glamorous 1895 mint-green Style Moderne building with a decent café of the same name. The **Far Eastern State Research Library** (ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 1), with its intricate red-and-black brick façade, was built from 1900 to 1902.

At Komsomolskaya pl is the newly re-constructed Orthodox church **Khram Uspenya Bozhey Materi**, a replica of one destroyed during communist times. On the south side of the square is the headquarters of the **Amur Steamship Company**.

### WATERFRONT & RIVER TRIPS

Steps from Komsomolskaya pl lead to the waterfront and a strip of beach that's very popular with sunbathers on hot days. Heading south, there's a string of summer-time food stalls and the landing stages for suburban river boats. Further on, as you climb the steps back up to ul Lenina, you'll encounter Khabarovsk's bombastic **WWII memorial** and the new multidomed **Church of the Transfiguration**.

A pleasant **city park** stretches 1.5km down-river (northwards). On the promontory is a cliff-top **tower** in which a troupe of WWI Austro-Hungarian POW musicians was shot dead for refusing to play the Russian Imperial anthem. It now contains a café, Kafe Utyos. Opposite the tower is a statue of Count Nikolai Muravyov-Amursky.

For a short local ride along the Amur, various hydrofoils and boats set off from May to October on hour-long beer-soaked trips for R70; 90-minute evening cruises cost R130. There are no set schedules – just

watch for one and jump on. Call **Amurrech-turist** (☎ 398 269) for more information.

### MUSEUMS

Four of Khabarovsk's museums are bunched together in impressive century-old buildings. One of the Far East's best attractions, the **Regional History Museum** (Kraevedchesky muzey; ☎ 312 054; ul Shevchenko 11; admission R140, photo permits R100; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) earns its rubles with six well laid-out (and well-lit) halls in an evocative 1894 red-brick building. Highlights are many, particularly a far bet-ter than average look into native cultures, including eerie larger-than-life-size spear-toting wooden figurines. Stuffed animals feature – *sacré bleu!* – and there are some English captions. Another highlight is the full-on panorama of the snowy 1922 civil war battle at Volochaevka. Judging by the lone White soldier aiming his musket at you, you are a Red (game: first one to find him *wins*). The museum also has a Soviet-fest room complete with medals, photos, stamps and banners (skimps on Gulag coverage though).

The nearby **Military Museum** (Voyenny muzey; ☎ 326 350; ul Shevchenko 20; admission R84; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is a not uninteresting four-room frenzy of battle-axes, guns, knives, and busts and photos of moustached heroes of past conflicts. In the back courtyard are a line of army trucks, cannons, tanks and a luxury officers-only rail carriage dating from 1926.

The highlights of the small **Archaeology Museum** (Muzey Arkheologii; ☎ 324 177; ul Turgenyeva 86; admission R120; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) are the reproductions and diagrams of the wide-eyed figures found at the ancient Sikachi-Alyan petroglyphs (p614). Lots of pot parts and spearheads – some dating, reportedly, from 30,000 years ago. We particularly like the mural of hunters sending spears into a thick-lashed, very submissive seal.

The **Far Eastern Art Museum** (Dalnevostochny Khudozhestvenny muzey; ☎ 328 338; ul Shevchenko 7; admission US\$4; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) has religious icons, Japanese porcelain and 19th-century Russian paintings.

Closed at research time (but apparently reopening) is the small **Museum of History of the Far Eastern Railway** (☎ 383 035; ul Vladivostokskaya 40; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri), which has plenty of photos and models.

## OTHER ATTRACTIONS

**Dinamo Park**, behind the Theatre of Musical Comedy, brims with sun and shade seekers in good weather; the ponds on the south side are popular swim-and-splash spots, and there are some small rides and a mechanical bull, of course.

Among the few churches that survived the Soviet years is the cute, red, blue, and white **Church of Christ's Birth** (Khristorozhdestvenskaya tserkov; ul Leningradskaya 65), with a kaleidoscopic interior of coloured glass and icons. Two-hour services are held most days at 7am and 5pm.

## Sleeping

Dalgeo Tourist arranges homestays (from US\$35 including breakfast) with advance notice.

## BUDGET

All rooms come with private bathroom, TV and refrigerator. The first two are not far from the train station.

**Hotel Zarya** (☎ 310 101; fax 310 103; hotel\_zarya@mail.ru; ul Kim Yu Chena 81/16; s/d incl breakfast from R850/1600; ☎ ☎) Modern makeover of a rather drab building gives Zarya a nearly 'boutique hotel' feel. Rooms are small – some have air-con. Staff is great, and the Internet's available 24 hours.

**Hotel Turist** (☎ 439 674; fax 439 421; postmaster@khabturist.kht.ru; ul Karla Marksa 67; s/d from R1100/1320) Facing a busy street, the eight-storey Turist looks every bit of its 40 years, but its rooms are well kept up – the cheapies are frequently full.

**Hotel Amur** (☎ 221 223; fax 217 141; ul Lenina 29; s/d incl breakfast from R1500/1600; ☎) Grand old building with 75 rooms (some with air-con) on the busy residential ul Lenina.

**Ekspress Vostok** (☎ 384 797; ul Komsomolskaya 67; s/d R1300/1800; ☎) New hotel geared to Russians – all 29 rooms are clean, with a writing desk and rather cheap vinyl floors.

At last pass, it was possible to bunk on a late-night disco cruise ship from June to September; it's simply called '**gostinitsa**' (hotel; ☎ 398 980; s/d R400/800).

## MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Hotel Intourist** (☎ 312 313; fax 326 507; www.intour.khv.ru; Amursky bul 2; s/d from R2352/2604; ☎) This big bolshevik is another monster of the past, but it's quite good. The halls – with darkwood

doors and small, but clean rooms – look over the nearby Amur, and most of the package tourists who come seem to like it. Prices fall in winter. Ask for 7th or higher floors on the north side for best views. There's a tourist agency and three restaurants.

**Hotel Amethyst** (☎ 420 766; fax 324 699; amethyst@hotel.kht.ru; ul Lva Tolstogo 5a; s/d from R2600/3100; ☎) A boutique-style hotel with just 16 spacious, nicely decorated rooms. The staff are great and there's a sauna. Breakfast is R200.

**Maly Hotel** (☎ 305 802; fax 305 939; ul Kalinina 83a; s/d US\$110/180; ☎) Behind a bank, in a small, quiet brick courtyard, the Maly has just 11 rooms – the doubles a lot bigger than the singles.

**Ali Hotel** (☎ 217 888; fax 304 403; ul Mukhinu 17; s/d incl breakfast US\$120/162; ☎ ☎ ☎) Ali's 20 rooms are Khabarovsk's roomiest, with sparkling bathrooms – though the hotel's a bit stranded (between apartments and garages). Fitness centre with pool and sauna.

**Hotel Sapporo** (☎ 306 745; fax 306 075; sapporo1@gin.ru; ul Komsomolskaya 79; s/d R2983/3297; ☎ ☎) Just off the main crawl, the Sapporo's 20 rooms are geared to the many visitors from Japan; small, clean (not particularly remarkable) rooms in a simple red-brick building. There's a good sauna on the premises.

**Parus** (☎ /fax 649 510; guest@parus.vic.ru; ul Shevchenko 5; s/d incl breakfast R3100/4400; ☎ ☎) Part of a century-old red-and-brick building near the water, the Parus seems more 'business centre' than hotel, though its spacious rooms are comfortable (all but four rooms are in a newer annex). Its bar opens at 7pm.

## Eating

Eating is easy in Khabarovsk: new spots open frequently on and off ul Muravyova-Amurskogo. Also you'll see – weather permitting – tons of street vendors selling pizza and the ever-present hot dog (R13).

## RESTAURANTS

**Rusky Restaurant** (☎ 306 587; Ussuriysky bul 9; meals R800-1200; ☎) noon-1am) Cosy and slightly kitsch, Rusky has four dacha-style cellar rooms decorated with balalaikas and stuffed owls – one with live traditional music at 8pm, which fills first. The food is very good. Sizzling sturgeon is a favourite, as is the breaded pork chop covered in dill.

**Chocolate** (☎ 420 097; ul Turgenyeva 74; meals R400-700; ☎) 24hr) Stylish eatery where the cool folk go (and the air-con is cranking in summer)

for international snacking (fajitas, burgers) and some superb desserts (the namesake brownie is R180).

**Kafe Utyos** (☎ 777 050; ul Shevchenko 15; meals R800-1500) In the tower in the park overlooking the river, Utyos is one of Khab's swankier restaurants – mostly Russian and Japanese food.

**Metro** (ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 35; meals R400-700, lunches R100-150; ☎ 11am-5pm & 6pm-2am Mon-Fri, 11am-2am Sat & Sun) Below a university building on pl Lenina, the Metro occupies (it's whispered) the spot where medical students once poked at cadavers. Now it's a flashy subterranean drink 'n' eat spot – best for the cheap lunch.

**Maly Hotel Restaurant** (☎ 305 802; meals R600-1000; ☎ 9am-11pm) The hotel's small restaurant is known for the best Japanese in town (all imported) and rather slow service. Worth calling ahead.

**Unikhab** (☎ 312 315; Amursky bul 2, 11th fl; meals R600-1000 ☎ noon-3pm & 6-11pm) The best of Hotel Intourist's three restaurants, the top-floor Japanese restaurant offers imported-from-Japan sushi with views.

**Overtime** (☎ 318 547; ul Dikopoltseva 12, Platinum Arena; meals R600-1000) If you're here in hockey season, Overtime's primary red, white and blue décor overlooks the rink; photos of local hockey greats adorn walls all year. The 'goalkeeper' is a spiced Sicilian fish (R350).

## CAFÉS & SELF-CATERING

**Tsentralny Gastronom** (ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 9; meals R150-300; ☎ 10am-10pm) In a 19th-century building, upstairs from a good 24-hour supermarket, this cute modern-retro self-service café has a good selection of meals, beer-on-tap and a refrigerator full of desserts.

**Dalny Vostok Cafe** (ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 18; meals R150-300; ☎ 9am-midnight) Plump blue booths overlook the street action at this two-line cheapie fast-food pick-and-point stop (go past the doors in the front bar).

**Citi HK Supermarket** (ul Karl Marks 76; ☎ 9am-11pm) Best grocery in town with lines to prove it.

## Drinking

Most drinking occurs at open-air cafés; good ones are along the river, north of the Hotel Intourist.

**Rio** (☎ 238 420; ul Lenina 49; cover R300; ☎ 9pm-4am Fri-Sun) The city's largest club on two levels –

photos show what to the occasion: topless women engaging in mud conflict.

## Entertainment

Those who cannot speak Russian cannot be entertained. Pushkin said that, right? These options require Russian (or enjoyment of confusion).

**Drama Theatre** (Teatr Dramy; ☎ 310 809; ul Dzerzhinskogo 44) Bet you a kopeck Chekhov's on.

**Theatre of Musical Comedy** (Teatr Muzykalnoy Komedii; ☎ 211 403; ul Karl Marks 64; tickets R80-800) Talking, joking, and the occasional heavy metal concert. Dio started its 2005 tour here.

**SovKino** (☎ 324 065; ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 32) Often shows dubbed Hollywood flicks.

## Shopping

**Tainy Remesla** (☎ 327 385; ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 17; ☎ 11am-6pm or 7pm) Best souvenir shop in town, in the old House of Pioneers building. Plenty of traditional items, though you may have to use your credit card to take many with you.

The main **market** (cnr bul Amursky & ul Tolstogo; ☎ 8am-7pm) covers everything from plug adaptors and fishing gear to underwear and fresh produce.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The **airport** (☎ 393 758) offers the following domestic services:

Destination	Duration	Frequency	Fare
Irkutsk	3hr	daily	R5800
Magadan	2½hr	4 weekly	R2630-3100
Moscow	8½hr	daily	R11,500
Nikolaevsk-na-Amure	1½hr	daily	R4100
Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky	2½hr	6 weekly	R5975
Vladivostok	1¾hr	daily	R2500
Yakutsk	3hr	6 weekly	R6200
Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk	1½hr	2 daily	R4200

There are international flights to Harbin (US\$170) and Guau (US\$320) in China, Seoul (from US\$300) in Korea, and Niigata (US\$340) and (July to September) Aomori (US\$340) in Japan. All international flights are subject to a R800 departure tax, usually included in ticket price.

The foreign airlines all have offices at the airport's international terminal (to the left

of the new one). **Intour-Khabarovsk** (☎ 312 154; Hotel Intourist; ☎ 9am-8pm) books tickets, as does **Transport Service Transit** (☎ 291 692; ul Karl Marks 76; ☎ 10am-2pm & 3-8pm), in the HK Citi Mall.

## BOAT & BUS

From Khabarovsk's river station boats sail down the Amur to Fuyuan in northern China (p614). Between May and October, hydrofoils run north on the Amur between Khabarovsk and Komsomolsk-na-Amure (R446, six hours) and Nikolaevsk-na-Amure (R2332, 17 hours). You'll save money taking the night bus from here to Komsomolsk-na-Amure then, catching a boat up. At research time, boats left here at 7am. The pink river station (*rechnoy vokzal*) houses the **boat ticket office** (☎ 398 654; ☎ 8am-10pm).

## TRAIN

Heading west, apart from the No 1 *Rossiya*, which departs for Moscow (R8500, five days 10 hours) and Irkutsk (R5000, 60 hours) on even-numbered dates, there's also the daily No 43 service to Moscow (R5700, five days 17 hours) and Irkutsk (60 hours, R3350) and the No 7 to Novosibirsk (R4550, 91 hours). Heading east, Vladivostok is best reached on the daily train 6 *Okean* service (R1500, 13 hours). See right for details on getting to Birobidzhan.

Other daily services (all leaving in the evening) include train 226 to Tynda (R1351, 30 hours), and on to Neryungri; the No 67 and No 953 to Komsomolsk (R860, eight hours), the latter continuing to Sovetskaya Gavan and Port Vanino for the ferry across to Sakhalin; and the No 385 to Blagoveshchensk (R1090, 16 hours).

Buy tickets at the station or the quieter (and nearby) **train ticket office** (zheleznodorozhniya kassy; ul Leningradskaya 56V; ☎ 9.30am-7.20pm), where you'll pay a R60 booking fee.

## Getting Around

Trolleybus 1 (R9) runs regularly from the airport to ul Muravyova-Amurskogo, taking around 30 minutes to cover the 5km; *marshrutky* (fixed-route minivans) also do the journey (R10). A taxi to/from the Hotel Intourist should cost no more than R250.

The easiest way to get into the city centre from the train station at the eastern end of Amursky bul is by way of tram 1, 2, 4 or 6 (R10), which cross ul Muravyova-

Amurskogo along ul Sheronova. Bus 35 connects the airport and the train station.

Travel agents can get you a car with driver for US\$15 per hour.

## AROUND KHABAROVSK

Contact a Khabarovsk travel agent for a full list of (sometimes rather touristy) regional tours, including dacha tours and the more intriguing Khekhtsir, a nature park near China with hiking trails and wildlife (about US\$50 per person).

## Birobidzhan Биробиджан

☎ 42162 / pop 90,000 / ☎ Moscow + 7hr

A couple hours shy of Khabarovsk on the trans-Siberian line (if you're heading east), Birobidzhan is actually a more attractive town, with shady streets and a quiet pace. It's interesting mostly for its history, as the big Hebrew letters spelling out the station's name indicate.

Birobidzhan (named for the swampy meeting place of the Bira and Bidzhan Rivers) is capital of the 36,000-sq-km Jewish Autonomous Region (Yevreyskaya Avtonomnaya Oblast). It was opened to settlement in 1927, when the Soviet authorities conceived the idea of a homeland for Jews. Some 43,000 Jews, mainly from Belarus and Ukraine but also from the US, Argentina and even Palestine, made the trek. In the 1930s growing anti-Semitism – fuelled by Stalin's paranoia that Jewish doctors were plotting to kill him – led to the ban of Yiddish and synagogues.

Since 1991 diplomatic ties between Russia and Israel have led to an outward flood of Jews. Of the estimated 22,000 who lived here then, only 4800 remain – about 2.4% of the region's population. Today Hebrew and Yiddish are once again taught in schools, and Khabarovsk's nearby boom has prompted some Jews to return from overseas.

For most visitors, an easy DIY day trip from Khabarovsk is more than enough time.

## ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

All is quite walkable. Parallel to the tracks to the south are the main streets ul Lenina, then ul Sholom-Aleykhema. An **Internet centre** (cnr uls Gorkogo & Lenina; per hr R40; ☎ 8am-10pm) faces pl Pobedy.

## SIGHTS

Across from the train station, pl Pobedy is devoted to WWII. Halfway along the square, west on ul Lenina, are the two main sights in town. **Freid** (☎ 27708; ul Sholom-Aleykhema 14A), reached from ul Lenina (look for the giant menorah on your left), is Birobidzhan's Jewish culture centre. Ask to see if you can chat with the lively director about local history, pick up the Jewish newspaper or buy a souvenir yarmulke (skull cap). Next door is a new synagogue you can visit.

About 100m further west, the **Regional Museum** (Kraevedchesky muzey; ☎ 68321; ul Lenina 25; admission R100; 🕒 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Fri) has a smattering of exhibits on local Jewish history (including an ad for a cheesy 1980s band), plus boars and bears and a mini-diorama of the Volochaevka civil war battle (akin to Khabarovsk's bigger and better one, but here blood pours from the 3-D dead guy's head).

## SLEEPING & EATING

**Hotel Vostok** (☎ 65330; ul Sholom-Aleykhema 1; s/d R850/1146) Birobidzhan's only hotel has nice rooms, and is next to a lively market. The hotel's restaurant serves meals, including filling R100 lunch specials.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Most trans-Siberian trains stop in Birobidzhan. The easiest way here is by the morning *elektrichka* (suburban train) from Khabarovsk (R90 to R120, 2¾ hours). It leaves Khabarovsk at 8am, and returns around 6pm. You can also catch buses from the Khabarovsk train station.

## Fuyuan (China) Фуяньюн

From mid-May to mid-October, daily hydrofoils leave Khabarovsk for the small Chinese town of Fuyuan (one way R1400, return R2000, 1½ hours) at 8am and 10am, returning in the evening (with tons of shopping bags). If you're planning to return to Russia, you'll need a Chinese visa and a double/multiple entry Russian visa. There's a Chinese consulate in Khabarovsk (see p607 for details). From Fuyuan you can take a bus to Jiamusi and then on to Harbin.

## Sikachi-Alyan Сикачи-Алян

The main attraction at Sikachi-Alyan, 40km north of Khabarovsk, is the enigmatic stone

carvings of strange graphic figures, dating from the 11th century BC. They can be found on the basalt boulders at the water's edge. Bring mosquito repellent in summer. There's a couple of competing museums here: the Ecological Tourist Complex was made by Russians, the local museum by local Nanai. It's not possible to just show up to the latter without prior arrangements.

An eight-hour tour – with guide, lunch and transport, usually looking at how Nanai locals make crafts out of fish skin – costs about US\$130.

## VLADIVOSTOK ВЛАДИВОСТОК

☎ 4232 / pop 650,000 / 🕒 Moscow + 7hr

It has the rep, everyone around the Far East seems to look up to it, and Vladivostok is indeed pretty good to look at for a couple days. Some streets are a bit drab, but the setting is remarkable: a series of peaks and peninsulas curl around Golden Horn Bay (bukhta Zolotoy Rog; named after Istanbul's similar-looking harbour), which is home to huge icebreakers and the Russian Pacific Fleet.

Quite the port-town bustler before communism (back when the Swiss family Brynner brought a bald Yul into the world here in 1920), Vladivostok's cosmopolitan urges have slowly returned after the long Soviet snooze. Vladivostok was firmly off limits to all foreigners (and most Russians) during the life of the USSR. Today you can (fairly freely) hop on ferries to far-off beaches on former navy-only islands, tour century-old forts or a Soviet sub, and weave past battalions of Chinese, Japanese and Korean summer tourists.

On the downside, summer is wet and foggy, and power outages plague winter. One transplant from Moscow exaggerated, 'I've been here four years and still haven't seen the sun.' September and October, locals swear, are best.

## History

Founded in 1860, Vladivostok (meaning 'Lord of the East') became a naval base in 1872. Tsarevitch Nicholas II turned up in 1891 to inaugurate the new trans-Siberian rail line. By the early 20th century, Vladivostok teemed with merchants, speculators and sailors of every nation in a manner more akin to Shanghai or Hong Kong than to Moscow. Koreans and Chinese, many of

0 200 m  
0 0.1 miles

To Lucky Tour (150m); BSB (1.5km); MUZ Hospital No 1 (2km); Bus Station (3km); Fort No 7 (13km); Vlad Motor Inn (20km); Venice Hotel; Airport (50km)

To US Consulate (1km); British Consulate (1km); To Pushkinskaya (1km); To Vozit Co (2km)

To Japanese Consulate (2km); Hotel Gaván (2km); Chinese Consulate (2km)

To Ruskyy Island, Popov Island, Slavyanka

INFORMATION	
Dalintourist Далинтурист	1 B2
Dom Knigi Дом Книги	2 C2
Iguana Cafe	3 B2
Knigomir Книгомир	4 B2
Korean Consulate	5 A1
Post Office Почта	6 B3
Sberbank Сбербанк	7 B2

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	
Арсенал Аквариум	8 A2
Arsenal Regional Museum	8 A2
Объединённый Краеведческий Музей им Арсеньева	9 B2
Monument to the Fighters for Soviet Power in the Far East	
Памятник Борцам за Власть Советов на Дальнем Востоке	10 B2
Museum of the Battle Fame	
Музей Боевой Славы	11 B2
Primorsky Art Gallery	
Приморская Картинная Галерея	12 B3
Pushkinsky Theatre	
Пушкинский Театр	13 D2
S-56 Submarine	
Подводная Лодка С-56	14 C3
Triumphal Arch	
Триумфальная Арка	15 C2
Vladivostok Fortress Museum	16 A1
White House Белый Дом	17 B2
Yul Brynner's House (No 15) Дом Бриннера	18 B3

EATING	
Ali Baba Fast Food Али-Баба	26 A2
Cafe Montmartre	
Кафе Монмартр	27 B2
Dva Gruzina Два Грузина	28 A2
Edem Эдем	29 B2
Izbushka Избушка	30 B2
Kafe Krishna Кафе Кришна	31 B2
Koreyka Кофейка	32 B3
Krestovy Pereval	
Крестовый Перевал	33 D2
Mauro Gianvanni Café	
Мауро Джанвани Кафе	34 B2
Mauro Gianvanni Café	
Мауро Джанвани	35 A2
Nostalgia Ностальгия	36 A3
Pizza M Пицца М	37 C2
Prestizh Престиж	38 A2
Stary Gorod Старый Гоголь	39 B2
Studio Coffee Студия Кофе	40 B2
Zolotoy Vek Золотой Век	41 C2

DRINKING	
Bezdonnaya Bochka	
Бездонная Бочка	42 A1
Kafe 35mm	(see 44)
Sky Bar	(see 21)

ENTERTAINMENT	
Bowling Centre	(see 48)
Gorky Theatre	
Театр имени М Горького	43 C2
Kino Okean Кино Оксан	44 A2
Philharmonic Hall Филармония	45 B2
Zabriskiye Point Забриский Пойнт	46 A3

SHOPPING	
Antique Shop Коллекционер	47 B2
Ekip ИКИП	48 A2
Flotsky Univermag	
Флотский Универмаг	49 B2
GUM ГУМ	50 C2
Nostalgija	(see 36)

TRANSPORT	
Biznes Intur Servis	
Бизнес Интур Сервис	(see 52)
Coastal Ferries Station	
Вокзал Прибрежных Морских Сообщений	51 C3
Dong Chun Ferry Company	(see 52)
Marine Terminal	
Морской Вокзал	52 B3
Primorskoye Aeroagentsvo	
Приморское Аэроагентаво	53 B3
Vladivostok Air	54 B2



whom had built the city, accounted for four out of every five of its citizens.

After the fall of Port Arthur in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05, Vladivostok took on an even more crucial strategic role, and when the Bolsheviks seized power in European Russia, Japanese, Americans, French and English poured ashore here to support the tsarist counterattack. Vladivostok held out until 25 October 1922, when Soviet forces finally marched in and took control.

Stalin deported or shot most of the city's foreign population. The northern suburb of Vtoraya Rechka became a transit centre for hundreds of thousands of prisoners waiting to be shipped to the gold fields of Kolyma.

From 1958 to 1992 the city was closed.

## Orientation

The heart of central Vladivostok is where Okeanskaya pr intersects with ul Svetlanskaya, the city's main waterfront axis. Most hotels are west of ul Aleutskaya (a block west of Okeanskaya pr), which runs past the train station. Ul Admirala Folkhina, west of Okeanskaya pr is an action-packed pedestrian shopping street, often called 'Arbat' by locals.

## MAPS

City maps are available at stalls and bookshops such as **Dom Knigi** (ul Svetlanskaya 43; ☎ 10am–7pm Mon–Sat, to 5pm Sun) and **Knigomir** (ul Aleutskaya 23; ☎ 10am–8pm), where you can also get some glossy regional books and postcards.

## Information

See p704 for consulate information.

## INTERNET ACCESS

**Iguana Cafe** (☎ 481 367; ul Svetlanskaya 23; per hr R60; ☎ 10am–midnight) Behind the indoor flower market. Beer and coffee handy.

**Post office** (ul Aleutskaya; per hr R50; ☎ 8am–8pm) Lightning-fast connection.

## MEDIA

**Guide to Vladivostok** Annual ad-based guide (in English) of limited usefulness; available at kiosks around town.  
**Vladivostok News** (vn.vladnews.ru) An online newspaper in English.

## MEDICAL SERVICES

**MUZ Hospital No 1** (☎ 258 663; ul Sadovaya 22) This is where ambulances take patients, a couple of kilometres north of the centre.

## MONEY

There are currency exchange desks and ATMs all over town.

**Sberbank** (ul Aleutskaya 12; ☎ 9am–7pm Mon–Sat, 10am–5pm Sun) Accepts travellers cheques and credit cards.

## POST

**Post office** (ul Aleutskaya; ☎ 8am–8pm) Opposite the train station, with a modern business centre upstairs. You can make international calls downstairs.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**PVU** (☎ 432 576; ul Pogranichnaya 6) In a pinch, can help extend your visa by a day – for a fee if it isn't for good reason – so you can exit Russia. It's best to get help from a travel agent.

## TRAVEL AGENCIES

The following agencies can arrange visas to China from the new consulate. At time of research, it costs about US\$125 and takes three days to a week – always a week for Americans. Otherwise the consulate accepts visa applications from 9.30am to 12.30pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday for the same price. The agencies can also set you up with train tickets, homestays and tours.

**Dalintourist** (☎ 222 949; www.dalintourist.ru; ul Admirala Fokina 8; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Fri, to 2pm Sat) Best all-round agency with the cheapest homestays, most-dependable visa service, good side trips to Vityaz beach and their new Arkhipovka Lodge (rooms including all meals cost R530).

**Vizit Co** (☎ 499 799; www.visitfareast.com; ul Svetlanskaya 147; ☎ 10am–7pm Mon–Fri) Friendly smaller-scale agency, good for homestays and registration, Trans-Siberian tips online, and local tours.

**Lucky Tour** (☎ 223 333; www.luckytour.com; ul Moskovskaya 1; ☎ 10am–6pm Mon–Fri) Helps organise trans-Siberian and Kamchatka trips – and has many local trips on offer. It's on the east side of the park (just northeast of Okeanskaya pr at northern edge of map).

## Sights & Activities

### WATERFRONT & CITY CENTRE

**Vladivostok Train Station**, originally built in 1912 and smartly renovated since, is an exotic architectural concoction with bold murals inside. Across the road stands an unusually animated, finger-pointing **Lenin**.

Ul Aleutskaya is lined with once-grand buildings. The house at **No 15** (the yellow building next door to the offices of the Far Eastern Shipping Company) was the home of actor Yul Brynner.

Pl Bortsov Revolyutsy has the impressive **Monument to the Fighters for Soviet Power in the Far East** as its centrepiece. The square, a focal point for performers and protesters of all kinds, hosts a market every Friday. The monolithic slab at the square's western end is the **White House** (Bely dom), home to the regional administration.

Heading east from the square, and just below the reconstruction of a **triumphal arch** (are they ever failure arches?) built originally for Tsar Nicholas II in 1902, you'll see the green-and-grey **S-56 submarine** (Memorialnoi Gvareiskoi Podvodnoi Lodke S-56; ☎ 216 757; Korabelnaya nab; adult/child R50/25; ☎ 10am–8pm). Lots of original gear inside (plus photos), but best is just clambering around inside a WWII sub that sunk 10 enemy ships (if you don't mind elbow-wrestling tour groups).

The bulk of local strolls, beer-drinking and ice cream-eating is back west along the **Sportivnaya Harbour**, where you'll find plenty of food stalls, an amusement park and a statue of a topless woman in the Amursky Gulf (Amursky zaliv) facing a rather trashy small beach. Just north is an **Aquarium** (Okeanarium; ul Batareyayna 4; admission R80; ☎ 10am–8pm Tue–Sun, 11am–8pm Mon).

## ARSENEV REGIONAL MUSEUM

Most intriguing in its unexpectedness, the **Arsenev Regional Museum** (Kraevedchesky muzey Arsenyeva; ☎ 413 977; ul Svetlanskaya 20; adult/child R70/35; ☎ 10am–7pm Tue–Sun) is named for a late-19th-century ethnographer. It features two floors of thematic rooms – some revel in mixing it up (water fountain and fake plants amid modern photographs, 'СССР' sign atop a green-and-red candy cane, the warring embrace of a bear and Siberian tiger that looks a little like ballroom dancing). Surprisingly not dozing or barking orders, the old lady guards here are pretty chipper, and are often fond of pointing out photos of Yul Brynner and other 'Western' celebrities who've visited Vladivostok.

## FUNICULAR

Vladivostok's favourite attraction may just be the smoothest running operation in the Far East: the freshly renovated **funicular railway** (funikulyor; ticket R5; ☎ 7am–8pm), which every few minutes makes a fun 60-second ride up a 100m hill. At the top, go under ul Sukhanova via the slummy underpass to a great (but

also slummy) lookout beside the buildings of DVG TU (Far Eastern State Technical University) – best view in town, no doubt.

You'll find the base of the funicular beside the elegantly restored **Pushkinsky Theatre** (ul Pushkinskaya).

## FORTS

Attention fort fans: Vladivostok teems with sprawling, rather unique subterranean forts built a century ago to repel potential Japanese attacks. Neophytes are best sticking with the accessible **Vladivostok Fortress Museum** (Muзей Vladivostokskaya Krepost; ☎ 400 896; ul Batareyayna 4A; admission R70; ☎ 10am–6pm), which blasts a giant gun at noon daily (drawing huge crowds of Asian tourists) and stages a knight fight, of all things, on Sunday. Inside the renovated fort you can see guns, bombs and fort models. The fort is just north of the aquarium, but is best accessed from ul Zapadnaya.

Sixteen protective forts encircle Vladivostok. The best (but pricey) is the hill-top **Fort No 7**, 14km north of the centre. It has 1.5km of tunnels, pretty much untouched since the last 400 soldiers stationed here left. (The sole inhabitants now include two pet cats to keep rats out.) Views are good too. Visiting on your own is very difficult, as the fort doesn't keep regular hours and it's hard to find. Organise a trip through an agency instead (about US\$30 or US\$40 per person including guide, transport and admission).

## ISLANDS & BOAT TOURS

To catch ferries to the nearby Russky and Popov Islands, part of the archipelago that stretches southwards from Vladivostok towards North Korea, go to the **coastal ferries station** (☎ 220 823), 100m east from the S-56 submarine. Locals will be going with you – bags of cucumbers and *kolbasa* (sausage) in tow – to offshore dachas.

There's still the question of whether foreigners are technically allowed to visit the once-closed Russky Island – at research time, we heard everything between 'no way' and 'no problem'. When we went, no-one said 'no' anything, but there's a chance you won't be able to leave the boat. There's no restriction to visiting the smaller Popov Island, where there is a better beach and guesthouses for an overnighter. Camping's possible on both.

At least three daily boats head to a couple of points on Russky (R40 return, 30 minutes) – around 7am, noon and 6.30pm – staying for 10 minutes, then returning to Vladivostok, making for an easy DIY shoestring bay cruise past the Russian Pacific Fleet and giant icebreakers. If you're planning to tour the island, boats stopping at 'podnozhye' (past an island canal) are best. Only one daily boat heads to Popov (R60 return, 1½ hours) – leaving at 1pm, and returning at 3pm.

A 90-minute bay cruise with a travel agent runs a little high: anywhere from US\$100 to US\$225 depending on the size of the group.

### OTHER SIGHTS

At the **Museum of the Battle Fame** (Muzei Boevoy Slavy; ☎ 217 904; ul Semenovskaya 17-19; admission R20; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sat, closed last Fri of month), in a fine old pillared building, a guy in a navy outfit will probably help you put shoe covers on for the carpeted floors of the three-floor exhibit. The museum is geared chiefly to border patrol history (despite its more marketable war-oriented name), with imaginative 'boat' and 'plane' doors to such-themed rooms. Up top you can spy on hipsters outside through high-definition binoculars.

The **Primorsky Art Gallery** (Primorskaya kartinnaya galereya; ☎ 411 195; ul Aleutskaya 12; admission R100; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6.30pm Tue-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun) was temporarily closed for renovation at the time of research. Its collection – a surprising range of 17th-century Dutch works and excellent works by Russian artists Repin and Vasily Vereshchagin – should be back before you arrive.

### Sleeping

Vladivostok is poorly served by budget accommodation; if funds are tight it's best to arrange a homestay for around US\$20 to US\$30, including breakfast, with one of the travel agencies listed earlier. Visa registration can be tricky – some agents can arrange it for a fee of US\$25 or so. Also note that the cheaper hotels get very busy during the summer months with package-tour groups from China and Korea – try to book well ahead. To make matters worse, you'll have to pay extra for breakfast at most hotels.

Note: in winter, Vladivostok routinely experiences energy shortages, which means hot water can be a rarity, and even cold

water disappears on occasion. Check with your travel agent and keep your bathtub full.

### MIDRANGE

**Hotel Primorye** (☎ 411 422; admin@hbotel.primorye.ru; ul Posetskaya 20; s/d from R1000/1200) A favourite central hotel on a rather quiet street, this renovated five-storey hotel has half of its quite nice rooms facing the harbour. (Smaller) cheapies go first, so call ahead. Fourth-floor café offers a R180 breakfast.

**Hotel Moryak** (☎ /fax 499 499; ul Posetskaya 38; s/d from R1000/1100) Cheapest rooms fill with tour groups first, but it's still a good back-up to Primorye with (very) small but bright rooms – many with a peek at the bay or Vladivostok hills. At the crest of a hilly street. No lift.

**Hotel Vladivostok** (☎ 412 808; www.vladhotel.vl.ru; ul Naberezhnaya 10; economy s/d R725/1450, standard s/d R1830/2330; ☎) One-time flagship of the Soviet era has the best economy single deal in the city, while the standard's slight extra comfort hardly justifies the price hike. Half the rooms have great views over the Amursky Gulf. Also see Hotel Visit Vladivostok.

**Hotel Ekvator** (☎ 412 060; www.hotelequator.ru, in Russian; ul Naberezhnaya 20; s/d from 1300/1800) Rather seedy (fading dark-wood panelling, exposed wiring), but facing the water, the Ekvator is often nevertheless full with groups in summer. Rooms are OK.

**Hotel Amursky Zaliv** (☎ 225 520; fax 221 430; ul Naberezhnaya 9; s/d from R550/1100) An enigmatic rambling place dug into the cliff-side right on the water (the top floor is at street level), this hotel is packed with Chinese and Russian tour groups from May to September. Several price ranges – all were full when we last dropped by.

**Hotel Gavan** (☎ 495 363; www.gavan.ru; ul Krygina 3; economy s/d R2000/2400, standard s/d incl breakfast R3600/4000; ☎ ☎) About 2km south of the city centre, the Gavan's harbour views are blocked by old-school Soviet-style apartments, but rooms are nice enough. Economy rooms are nearly identical to standard ones, but don't get free use of the 25m indoor pool (anyone can swim if they pay R130 entry, plus R25 to use the hilarious slide). Several buses get here from the centre, including Nos 57 to 62.

### TOP END

**Hotel Hyundai** (☎ 407 205; www.hotelhyundai.ru; ul Semenovskaya 29; s/d incl breakfast R6000/6500; ☎) Prob-

ably the city's nicest hotel – with comfortable rooms offering excellent views on either side, plus an air ticket agency, casino, sauna, Korean restaurant and top-floor bar on hand.

**Hotel Versailles** (☎ 264 201; www.versailles.vl.ru; ul Svetlanskaya 10; s/d R4000/5000) Quite a regal place in the centre, with a bring-out-the-tsar dining room and 40 nice rooms that get frequently filled with upmarket tour groups. The buffet breakfast is R280. Save your French skills, it's called 'Versal' here.

**Hotel Viber Vladivostok** (☎ 413 453; www.vizit.vl.ru; ul Naberezhnaya 10; s/d incl breakfast R2650/2950) Occupying the 4th floor of the Hotel Vladivostok, these refurbished rooms come with maybe a few more comforts than in the main hotel. Has a nice small bar handy.

**Vlad Motor Inn** (☎ 331 351; www.vlad-inn.ru; ul Vosmaya 11, Sanatornaya; r from US\$139) For a respite from Russia, this Canadian-Russian joint venture, 20km north of the centre in the leafy coastal suburb of Sanatornaya, is quiet, very comfortable and very Western. Rates include free airport transfers and the restaurant is superb. Sanatornaya is six stops from the city on the local train or a 30-minute bus ride.

**Venice Hotel** (☎ 307 600; fax 307 602; ul Portovaya 39; s/d US\$76/94) Near the airport. A fine place if you arrive late or leave early.

### Eating

#### RUSSIAN

**Izbushka** (☎ 510 269; ul Admirala Fokhina 9; meals R250-500; ☎ 11am-11pm) Trad Russian eatery attracting local couples, most opting for the 'forest' room rather than the front 'dacha'. The food's particularly good (start with the bread-covered bowl of *shchi*, soup of cabbage, potato and beef, R95). Mugs of Russian beer here, not the usual costly imports.

**Kopeyka** (ul Aleutskaya; meals R100-200; ☎ 8am-midnight) Fast-food, pick-and-point cafeteria with Soviet-era posters and McDonald's-style seating in the modern pyramid across from the train station. The mezzanine café has good espressos for R20.

**Nostalgiya** (☎ 410 513; ul Pervaya Morskaya 6/25; meals R600-1000; ☎ 8am-11pm) This long-established upscale restaurant and café serves fine, good-value Russian cuisine, such as chopped chicken fillet stuffed with vegetables (R200). Those diners just off seven days of noodles from train samovars may faint at the tsarist elegance in the small restaurant – for the less-tender few, it's a little too plush.

**Stary Gorod** (☎ 205 294; ul Semenovskaya 1/10; meals from R600) Good Russian meals in a village-style interior that's mod-retro, with stars shining above and waterfalls and fish tanks.

### GEORGIAN

**Dva Gruzina** (Two Georgians; ☎ 268 580; ul Pogranichnaya; meals R250-500; ☎ 10am-1am) Wagon-wheeled benches and murals of Zapata-moustached men greet mostly local diners. The food's very good – the lone daily soup is especially flavourful – but there's little but pork and beef (and no English menu). Beer is a merciful R50.

**Krestovyy Pereval** (☎ 265 640; ul Lutsogo 12; meals R700-1000; ☎ 11am-late) Great two-storey restaurant designed like a rock-garden treehouse. Plenty of fish dishes to add to faves like bowl-of-rabbit-and-potatoes (R350) or mutton stew (R360).

### ITALIAN

**Mauro Gianvanni** (☎ 220 782; ul Admirala Fokina 16; meals R400-800) Slick mirror-windowed Italian restaurant near the water, run by a big Italian guy. The thin-crust pizza (around R200) is easily the best east of the Urals. The café location (Okeansky pr 9) is slightly cheaper, with pastas and lots of cocktail action (but no pizza).

**Pizza M** (☎ 268 511; ul Svetlanskaya 51A; meals R350-700) Classier than its name might suggest, the M (near Gorky Theatre) is rather rustic inside, despite the videos on the TV above the painted fireplace. The pizza is pretty good, and there's several pasta and meat or fish dishes (around R350 to R500).

### JAPANESE

**Edem** (☎ 261 990; ul Admirala Fokina 22; meals R1200-1800; ☎ 11am-midnight Sun-Thu, 11am-2am Fri & Sat) Vladivostok's first and still best sushi bar is in an attractive cellarlike space with nooks to sit in. Sushi and sashimi combos start at R1200. 'Sushi time' is 11am to 5pm, and 6pm to 11pm only.

### CAFÉS

**Studio Coffee** (☎ 552 222; ul Svetlanskaya 18; meals R300-500; ☎ 24hr) Vladivostok's cool kids (and parents) come here to this indoor-outdoor café to enjoy a good range of drinks, excellent hamburgers (R190) and appealing salads (R100 to R250). A big set lunch is R300 (served from noon to 4pm).



**Kafe Krishna** (Okeansky pr 10/12; meals R100-200; ☎ 11am-7pm Mon-Sat) At press time this excellent cheap-lunch turf – with Indian, blissful all-veggie lunches and lots of local Hare Krishnas sipping – was getting muscled out of its prime location. Hopefully it's still here, or at a new location, as its freshly baked items draw streams of nose-following passers-by in.

**Cafe Montmartre** (☎ 412 789; ul Svetlanskaya 9/6; meals R300-600; ☎ 9am-3am) Down a small alley, the Montmartre offers good desserts, set lunches for R180, and a R120 'English breakfast' (cream-of-wheat, not eggs and ham).

### QUICK EATS & SELF-CATERING

For fresh fruit and vegetables, there are daily stalls along ul Posetskaya, behind the post office.

**Ali Baba Fast Food** (☎ 264 887; ul Pogranichnaya 6/3; ☎ 10am-midnight) Cheap Middle Eastern-style pita-bread sandwiches, soup and a Coke cost R70. Ice cream and salads too. Caravan-style décor and hangings block the fast-food line from view. Bear loops may be on the TVs, Pink Floyd on the stereo. Nearby you can get a *shawarma* (shish kebab) at a stand by Sportivnaya Harbour for about R50.

Other recommendations:

**Prestizh** (ul Svetlanskaya 1/2; ☎ 24hr) Supermarket with good bakery.

**Zolotoy Vek** (ul Svetlanskaya 29; ☎ 8am-10pm) Another grocery.

### Drinking

Cafés can be good for a quiet drink, but best are the outdoor beer gardens by Sportivnaya Harbour – for views and cheaper brews.

**Bezdonnaya Bochka** (Bottomless Barrel; ☎ 221 383; ul Fontannaya 2; ☎ noon-4am Sun-Thu, to 6am Fri & Sat) This cavernlike bar is Vlad's best beer bingeing ground and is a pretty popular place, particularly on weekends, when you should book a table if you want a seat.

**Kafe 35mm** (ul Naberezhnaya 3; ☎ 11am-2am) Spacious, laid-back bar upstairs at Kino Okean. Local students enjoy it.

**Sky Bar** (Hotel Hyundai, ul Semenovskaya 29, 12th fl; ☎ 6pm-2am) Excellent bay views, but just a beer hits you for R180 a pop.

### Entertainment

**Bowling Centre** (☎ 400 728; ul Batereynaya 8; per game R50-100; ☎ 10am-2am) Very Soviet eight-laner

upstairs in sports complex (note the old athletic mosaics).

**Stadium Dinamo** (ul Pogranichnaya) The popular local football team, Luch-Energiya, plays games here April to November. Many seats have bay views too.

**BSB** (☎ 456 250; Krasnogo Znameni pr 67; admission R100-300; ☎ 9pm-4am) This is the city's best club-disco, drawing rather young students. On weekends rock bands hit the stage at midnight.

**Zabriskie Point** (☎ 215 715; ul Naberezhnaya 9A; cover Mon-Thu R300, Fri-Sun R500; ☎ 8pm-4am) Attached to the rear of the Hotel Amursky Zaliv, Zabriskie is Vladivostok's main rock and jazz club. Live music at 11pm every night but Monday, DVD concerts fill in the gaps. Staff told us 'we are the same as Hard Rock Café', except there's a sushi bar instead of bad burgers and we couldn't find Jimi Hendrix's guitar on the collection of rock posters on the wall. Pricy, but not without character.

Other options:

**Kino Okean** (☎ 406 406; ul Naberezhnaya 3) Multiplex cinema shows dubbed movies only.

**Philharmonic Hall** (Filarmoniya; ☎ 260 821; ul Svetlanskaya 15) For classical music performances.

**Gorky Theatre** (Teatr Gorkogo; ☎ 260 520; ul Svetlanskaya 49) The city's main venue for drama.

### Shopping

Plenty of souvenir stands sell *matryoshka* dolls, lacquered boxes and postcards. Here's the cream of the crop.

**Flotsky Univermag** (ul Svetlanskaya 11; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat & Sun) Great army and navy supply store with those cute blue-and-white striped navy undershirts (R95) and flap-back shirts (R400), plus army ties, badges and hats.

**Antique shop** (ul Svetlanskaya 20; ☎ 9.30am-6pm) Small but interesting collection of yesterday's titbits: medals, arts, flags, cameras, coins (some obviously picked up abroad by vacationing Russians).

**Nostalgiya** (ul Pervaya Morskaya 6/25; ☎ 10am-8pm) Nice range of traditional handicrafts, plus Vladivostok-themed artwork and Putin refrigerator magnets.

**GUM** (ul Svetlanskaya 35; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-7pm Sun) If you collect GUMS (Soviet-style department stores), this is the Far East's most Art Deco elegant. Some traditional souvenirs on the ground floor.

**Ekip** (☎ 400 914; ul Batereynaya 8; ☎ 10am-7pm) Sporting gear including sleeping bags, tents, windsurfing boards and bikes.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

Direct flights go to Moscow (R16,700, nine hours, twice daily); flights via Novosibirsk are cheaper (R12,300). Other domestic service includes Khabarovsk (R2500, 1¼ hours, daily), Irkutsk (R6000, four hours, six weekly), Magadan (R5000, three hours, two weekly), Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky (from R7000, four hours, three weekly), Yakutsk (R8500, two weekly) and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk (R4900 to R6500, 1¼ hours, daily).

Vladivostok Air offers flights to Harbin (R5900, two weekly) and to Tianjin (R7300, one weekly), China. There are less frequent flights to Dailin.

For Japan, Vladivostok Air flies to Niigata (R10,500, two weekly), Toyama (R12,700, two weekly) and once weekly in August to Tokyo (R6900) and twice weekly in summer to Osaka (R15,000).

Both Vladivostok and Korean Air fly direct six times weekly to Seoul (R11,000) or Pusan (R11,000).

**Primorskoye Aeroagentsvo** (☎ 407 707; www.airagency.ru; ul Posetskaya 17; ☎ 8am-7pm) is a reliable chain for tickets with offices around much of the Russian Far East. **Vladivostok Air** (☎ 205 133; ul Svetlanskaya 22; ☎ 9am-7pm) is in a convenient location for the main carrier serving Vladivostok.

#### BOAT

The **Biznes Intur Servis** (☎ 497 391; www.bisintour.com; 3rd fl, Morskoy Volkzal, Okeansky pr 1; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri) sells tickets for the fairly regular ferries (it claims to offer them every Monday and Saturday, but check first) between Vladivostok and the Japanese port of Fushiki from late February to early January. The often rough trip takes 42 hours and the ship is rarely full. Four categories of berths range from US\$228 to US\$888 one way (meals included) – minus student discounts.

**Dong Chun Ferry Company** (☎ 494 060; www.dongchunferry.co.kr, not in English; 2nd fl, Morskoy Volkzal, Okeansky pr 1; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 7am-9am Sat) sells tickets for weekly ferry service to Sokcho, Korea (US\$168 to US\$312 one way, 24

hours), generally leaving at 10.30am Saturday. In Sokcho, you can catch a bus to Seoul (W15,000, three hours) every couple of hours. 'It's not such a great boat,' an agent warned us. 'It's Chinese.'

#### BUS

The **bus station** (☎ 323 378; ul Russkaya), 3km north of the centre, sends many buses around the Primorsky Territory. You can catch a bus every 30 or 40 minutes to Nakhodka (R180, four hours) or three times daily to Khabarovsk (R665, 15 hours). Some southbound destinations may be off-limits to foreigners without a permit.

#### TRAIN

At the time of writing, the No 1 service, the *Rossiya*, leaves the **train station** (☎ 491 005) for Moscow (R9100, 6½ days) on even-numbered days, passing through Irkutsk (R6300, 73 hours). A cheaper service, also on even-numbered days, is the No 239 – it's R6300 for a Moscow *kupe* ticket. On odd-numbered days No 7 *Sibir* to Novosibirsk (R5150, four days) is a cheaper option for Irkutsk (R4200).

Other trains include the daily No 5 *Okean* overnight to Khabarovsk (R1500, 13 hours), the daily No 351 via Khabarovsk and Komsomolsk-na-Amure (on the BAM) to Vanino (R1700, 41 hours), where you can get a ferry service to Sakhalin Island. The No 53 service to Kharkiv, Ukraine – going on odd-numbered days – has a (possibly deserved) less-than-stellar reputation for comfort and cleanliness.

Leaving (local time) at 2am on Tuesday and Friday, the No 185 connects Vladivostok with Harbin, China (R1500, about 30 hours) in the Heilongjiang province of northern China, from where there are daily connections to Beijing. There are many delays and border checks. The train crosses the border at the Chinese town of Suifenhe and also stops at Mudanjiang.

Tickets for long-distance trains are sold in the office beside the main platform. If there are long queues here you can buy tickets at the **Service Centre** (☎ 210 404; ☎ 8am-6.45pm), at the southern end of the building, for a whopping commission of R104, plus R48 if you need information first. Travel agents (p616) will also get tickets for you for similar fees.

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Painfully, no direct bus or train links the airport with the centre (50km south). From the centre, take a local train three stops to Vtoraya Rechka (near the bus station, *avtovokzal*), or one of the several buses (including bus 23) that goes from the stand at the corner of ul Aleutskaya and ul Semenovskaya (R7, 30 to 40 minutes).

From the bus station, 150m east of the railway, 'bus' (actually *marshrutka*) 101 goes to the airport (R50, one hour) about every hour from 6.30am to 6pm; call the **bus station** (☎ 322 751) for information. Coming from the airport it's the reverse procedure. The whole trip takes about two hours.

A taxi is far easier. A taxi to the airport is about R500 (45 minutes), while the airport taxi gang will try to charge triple (or more) going the other way. Look for minivan taxis heading to the centre.

### LOCAL TRANSPORT

Trolleybuses and trams cost R7 a ride; pay when exiting. From in front of the train station, trams 4 and 5 run north then swing east onto ul Svetlanskaya, to the head of the bay; tram 7 stays on ul Aleutskaya, running north past the market. The many buses are quicker.

For local ferry information, see p617.

## AROUND PRIMORSKY TERRITORY

It's hard to explore or raft any of mountainous Primorsky Territory without the help of a travel agent. Prices vary wildly – check a few. Trips to Gaivoron to see the tigers, for example, start around US\$50 or US\$60 per person (with a group of four or more) and go up to about US\$125 or US\$150.

Some of these places can be seen on day trips from Vladivostok.

### Slavyanka Славянка

Locals enjoy making a day trip by ferry to the port of Slavyanka, 50km south towards the (off-limits) North Korean border. The small town is nice enough, but best are nearby beaches, such as **Vityaz**, reached by a hour-long drive south by 4WD. Dalintourist (p616) in Vladivostok can help make transport and accommodation arrangements.

From the **coastal ferries station** (☎ 220 823) three daily boats leave for Slavyanka. At

research time, a lone hydrofoil left Vladivostok at noon (R300 return, one hour), and a bigger boat left at 8.50am and 6.30pm (R300, 2½ hours).

Buses also go to Slavyanka from Vladivostok, but sometimes foreigners are not permitted to go by land.

### Gaivoron & Lake Khanka

Гаиворон и Озеро Ханка

Museums around the Russian Far East look for any excuse to fit in a stuffed Amur tiger or two, but only here are you guaranteed to see the real thing in a natural setting – up close. About 235km north of Vladivostok, near the 4000-sq-metre Lake Khanka spanning the Chinese border, **Gaivoron** is the location of the Russian Academy of Sciences biological research reserve, home to two rare Amur tigers. **Dr Victor Yudin** (☎ 42352-74249) keeps the duo safely behind an electrified high wire fence in a 2-hectare compound, beside which Yudin has several bears and other orphaned animals passed on to him by locals.

The nearby **Lake Khanka** is home to around 350 different species of bird every summer. The lake's shallow waters – only around 4m at the deepest – famously bloom with giant lotus flowers.

It's possible to organise an 11- or 12-hour day trip from Vladivostok to see the tigers (starting at US\$200 to US\$250 for four people), but it's worth tacking on a couple of hours to see the lake (for about US\$30 or US\$50 extra, at least). Some agencies charge more.

### Partizanskaya River

Партизанская Река

Vladivostok tour agencies also offer day rafting trips in summer to the Partizanskaya River, a couple of hours' drive north. This is a generally gentle run; more experienced rafters should look into the longer trips along the Kema River further north. Trips cost about US\$400 for up to four people.

### Nakhodka Находка

The eastern terminus of the Trans-Siberian Railway, Nakhodka was little more than a landing after WWII but is now a major fishing port. Its sheltered bay was discovered by a storm-tossed Russian ship in the 1850s (its name means 'discovery').

During the Soviet-era, Nakhodka was the only Pacific port open to foreign ships. The main reason for heading out this way is to inspect the dramatic coastal rock formations near the city; there are several guest-houses in town.

A couple of daily trains leave Vladivostok for Nakhodka (R90, 3½ hours), and more frequent buses (R180, four hours).

### Sikhote-Alin Nature Reserve

Сихоте-Алинский Заповедник

Home to the Russian-American Siberian Tiger project, this 3440-sq-km forested reserve, headquartered in the coastal town of Terney, stretches from the Sikhote-Alin Mountains past clear salmon streams and a savannalike oasis to the Pacific coast and rocky beaches. Chances of seeing a tiger are slim, but it's beautiful.

It's an 11- or 12-hour ride one way. Most visitors go on five-day trips. You'll need permission to visit. Contact a Vladivostok agency; they can also sort out transport and accommodation. Dalintourist's five-night 'Tigerland' trip hits several points of the reserve; it costs about R10,000 per person if a group of four goes. You can also travel on your own to their lodge in the south of the reserve for far cheaper access to the area.

## EASTERN BAM

Mocked by Moscow brass (and much of Russia), the one-track BAM makes its greatest construction achievements on this 80-hour stretch east of Lake Baikal, where it passes more taiga, and through a 15.7km tunnel cut through solid rock. Most of the towns aren't much to look at – 1970s housing blocks put up 'so leaders wouldn't look like idiots for spending so much on the railroad,' one local cynic suggested – and with a greater stench of vodka in many passers-by. But many locals will be delighted at your interest (and maybe get you drunk). The best stop-off point is Komsomolsk-na-Amure, a European-styled town built in the 1930s.

### TYNDA ТЫНДА

☎ 41656 / ☎ 39,000 / ☎ Moscow + 6hr

If BAM gets you giddy, Tynda's your town. Flanked by low-lying, pine-covered hills, Tynda is BAM HQ and a hub for trains

between Severobaikalsk and Komsomolsk-na-Amure. The 'Little BAM' connects with Blagoveshchensk to the south; the AYAM (Amuro-Yakutskaya Magistral) heads north, getting as far as Aldan – plans to reach Yakutsk remain on hold. Tynda shows off its Soviet roots: it was a shack village before BAM centralised its efforts here in 1974.

### Orientation & Information

The train station – the city's most striking landmark – is across the Tynda River. A pedestrian bridge leads 1km north to the central ul Krasnaya Presnaya. At research time, the only ATM (good for Cirrus and Eurocards) was at the train station. You can get online at the station's **Service Centre** (per hr R65; ☎ 8am-7pm), but better connections are at the **Post Office** (ul Krasnaya Presnaya 53; per hr R40; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat & Sun), at the street's east end.

Travel agent **Nadezhda Nizova** (☎ 29655; td\_nadejda@amur.ru; ul Festivalnaya 1; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) may be able to help with area tours. Contact feisty adventurer **Alexey Podprugin** (☎ 29126; bamland@mail.ru) for kayaking, hiking and cross-country skiing trips.

### Sights & Activities

The **BAM Museum** (☎ 41690; ul Sportivnaya 22; admission R60; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat), a couple of blocks southwest of the red-brick Orthodox cathedral (Sobor Svyatoy Troitsy), covers native Evenki culture, local art, WWII and regional wildlife, but is known for its four rooms of BAM relics and photos (no English). Two rooms cover the railway's early years – and the Gulag prisoners who built it. Look for sci-fi author Ivan Efremov's photo, who secretly wrote while in the Gulag.

**Zarya** is a native Evenki village nearby. Bus 105 from the train station goes eight times daily (30 minutes).

Clean and well-patronised, Tynda's public **banya** (bathhouse; ☎ 40030; ul Amurskaya; admission R60, lyux from R300; ☎ for women 2pm-8.30pm Thu & 10am-8.30pm Sat, ☎ for men 2-8.30pm Fri & 10am-8.30pm Sun) is the real McCoy when it comes to the hellishly hot steam room and chilly dunks in a pool. Freshly cut birch branches are available. The *'lyux' banya* is open 9am to 9pm Tuesday to Sunday. It's in a red-brick building 50m south of a dramatic sledgehammer-wielding **statue** at the eastern end of ul Krasnaya Presnaya.

### AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Decorated when the nation still mourned Brezhnev, and hidden away atop an enigmatic yester-year Soviet shopping centre, the **Hotel Nadezhda** (☎ 27021; 4th fl, ul Festivalnaya 1; r per person with shared bathroom R290-450) somehow feels homy and certainly offers that only-when-in-the-Russian-Far-East glory. It's clean and central, there's a kitchen, and staff don't complain even if a drunk guest vomits in the hallways (selfless research methods back this up). The 15 rooms sometimes fill with construction workers. You pay per bed; two or three beds per room. It's in the Torgovy Dom Nadezhda, behind Hotel Yunost.

### Sleeping

**Komnaty Otdykha** (☎ 73297; train station; beds per 6/12/24hr R150/240/420, lyux beds R198/335/610, showers R55) Surprisingly comfy and clean 'rest' rooms.

**Vagon Gostinitsa** (per 6/12/24hr R101/161/261) A parked *kupe* (compartment) carriage on platform No 1.

**Hotel Yunost** (☎ 23534; ul Krasnaya Presnaya 49; r from R500) This crumbling hotel has overpriced rooms with cold-water only.

### Eating

Tynda is low-key meal-wise.

**Midina** (ul Krasnaya Presnaya 49; dishes R120-170; ☎ 11am-2am Mon-Sat) Behind the Yunost, this funky restaurant is rather splashy. It's located above a casino that serves big, shareable portions of Chinese (and some Russian) dishes. Karaoke at 8pm.

**50/50** (ul Krasnaya Presnaya 43; dishes from R30) About 150m west of Midina, this is a half beer bar, half snack bar with surprisingly tasty Russian meals served on its outside porch.

### Getting There & Around

Trains 75/76 link Tynda with Moscow on even-numbered days, and Nos 77/78 on odd-numbered dates with Novosibirsk via the western BAM. These stop in Severobaikalsk (R1335, 26 hours). Trains 963/964 connect Tynda with Komsomolsk (R1351, 37 hours, daily), Nos 81/82 with Blagoveshchensk (R1260, 16 hours, daily), and Nos 325/326 with Khabarovsk (R1351, 30 hours, daily). Many of these trains go

on to Neryungri (R411, five hours), as does Tynda-Neryungri link Nos 958/957.

You can buy regional air tickets at **Vesta Service Centre** (ul Krasnaya Presnaya 39; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-6pm).

Bus 5 outside the train station goes every 20 or 30 minutes along ul Krasnaya Presnaya (R10). A taxi ride is R60.

### NERYUNGRI НЕРЮНГРИ

☎ 8247 / population 70,000 / ☎ Moscow +6hr  
Set on a flat-top hill about 220km north of Tynda, modern Neryungri loses most views due to its 30-year-old housing blocks. It's worth a visit only for the land link with Yakutsk, 800km north. The banks have no ATMs.

One of the world's largest open-cut **coal mines** (*razrez*) is just outside town – where adventurers can fairly freely wander the facilities and see *mammoth* trucks that transport chunks of coal. Take bus 3 (R7, 25 minutes).

Book ahead for one of **Hotel Arigus'** (☎ 30173; arigus@rambler.ru; pr Druzhby Narodov 27; s/d R850/1100) four clean rooms. **Hotel PLINZ** (☎ 44234; ul Yuzhno-Yakutskaya 18/5; bed per person R180-400) is a scrappy back up. The cosy, central **Pizzeria** (ul Karla Marksa 23; meals R200-300; ☎ noon-2am) focuses more on its Russian dishes.

See Tynda (left) for train links here. Taxi vans leave from the train station, 3km east of the centre, a couple of times daily to Yakutsk (R1800, 20 to 24 hours), usually following morning train arrivals from Tynda.

### KOMSOMOLSK-NA-AMURE КОМКОМОЛЬСК-НА-АМУРЕ

☎ 4217 / pop 305,000 / ☎ Moscow +7hr  
By far the eastern BAM's best place to stop, Komsomolsk-na-Amure (the 'City of Youth', a whopping 1500km east of Tynda) sports a carefully planned tree-lined, bricked pavement centre with long prospekts, European-style buildings and rattling trams. Built in a hey-ho fervour in 1932, Komsomolsk was a Soviet-dream transformation of a swamp into a planned city for the Young Communist League (*komsomol*) to help populate the east – and strengthen area defences, with steelworks, an aircraft factory and ship-building yards on the Amur River. Activity has slowed since the glory days.

It's a convenient hub between Tynda, Khabarovsk (290km to the south), Vanino's ferry service to Sakhalin Island, and Nikolaevsk-na-Amure up the river.

### Information

**Far Eastern Mutual Bank** (pr Mira 26; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat & Sun) ATM open 24-hours.

**Gladiator** (pl Lenina, Dom Kulturi Stroitolini, 2nd fl; per hr from R25; ☎ 10am-10pm) In a pillared building behind Lenin's statue, this Internet café has a King Arthur theme inside.

**Nata Tour** (☎ /fax 530 332; www.amurnet.ru/natatour/index.html; pr Pervostroiteley 31, Hotel Voskhod room 104; ☎ 10am-2pm & 3-6pm Mon-Fri) Experienced travel service books rafting, birding, fishing, skiing, Gulag, windsurfing and other trips in the region. Ask for overnight stays in the Nanai village of Nizhny Khablaby upriver (about US\$20).

**Post office** (pr Mira 27; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat, to 3pm Sun)

**Telephone office** (pr Mira 31; ☎ 8am-11pm)

### Sights

Just northwest of the river station, Komsomolsk's landmark sight is the **WWII memorial**, which features stoic faces chipped from stone, with pillars marking the years of WWII evenly.

Worth it even if you can't read Russian, the **Regional Museum** (☎ 592 640; pr Mira 8; admission R25; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Fri, 11am-6pm Sat & Sun) features several rooms filled with old, but well cared for, exhibits (we like the BAM construction hats best) showing how Komsomolsk came to be.

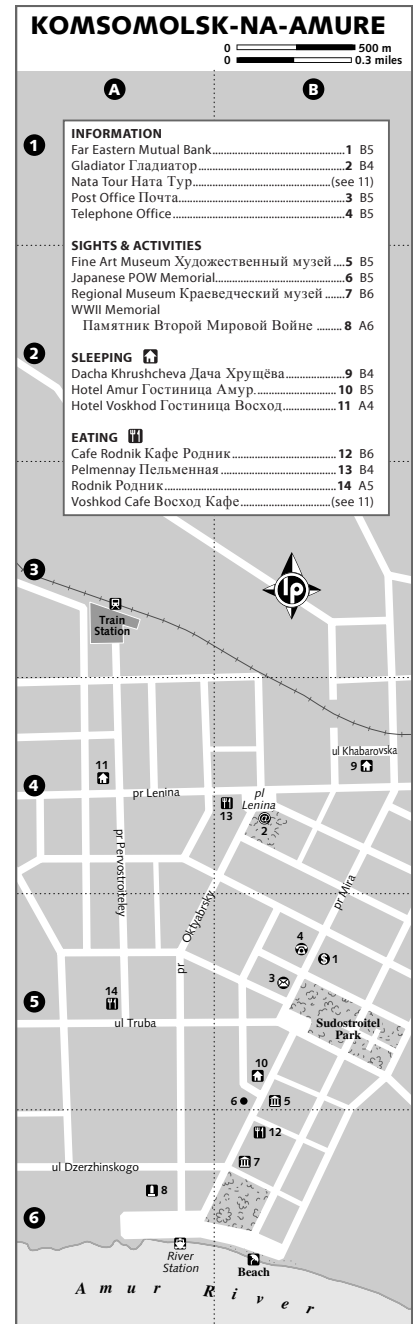
The **Fine Art Museum** (☎ 590 822; pr Mira 16; admission R100; ☎ 10am-5.45pm Tue-Sun) has a couple of floors of changing exhibits.

It's a long shot, but you could ask Nata Tour about (rare) visits of the Yury Gagarin Aircraft Factory east of the centre. Look around for **Soviet mosaics** beside housing blocks on back streets. There's a simple **Japanese POW memorial**, off pr Mira. If things seem quiet on a sunny day, probably half of town's at the **beach**, just east of the river station.

### Sleeping

Three good ones. All come with TV and private bathroom.

**Hotel Voskhod** (☎ 535 131; pr Pervostroiteley 31; s/d from R560/800) This eight-storey grey hotel has boxy rooms – some renovated, all quite clean. The top-floor café serves good food and there's its bowling and a disco next door.



INFORMATION	
Far Eastern Mutual Bank.....	1 B5
Gladiator Гладдиатор.....	2 B4
Nata Tour Ната Тур.....	(see 11)
Post Office Почта.....	3 B5
Telephone Office.....	4 B5
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	
Fine Art Museum Художественный музей.....	5 B5
Japanese POW Memorial.....	6 B5
Regional Museum Краеведческий музей.....	7 B6
WWII Memorial Памятник Второй Мировой Войне.....	8 A6
SLEEPING	
Dacha Khrushcheva Дача Хрущёва.....	9 B4
Hotel Amur Гостиница Амур.....	10 B5
Hotel Voskhod Гостиница Восход.....	11 A4
EATING	
Cafe Rodnik Кафе Родник.....	12 B6
Pelmennay Pельменная.....	13 B4
Rodnik Родник.....	14 A5
Voshkod Cafe Восход Кафе.....	(see 11)



**Dacha Krushcheva** (☎ 540 659; ul Khabarovska 47; r R1500 & R2500) Built for Nikita Khrushchev – Gorbachev and Brezhnev have slept here – the ‘dacha’ (a concrete villa with small shady yard) is a step back in time. Nikita’s room is a massive suite with private balcony; his gun-toting goons probably took the cheaper rooms downstairs. It’s behind a green plank fence.

**Hotel Amur** (☎ 590 984; ruma@kmscom.ru; pr Mira 15; r R925 & R1425) Fifteen renovated rooms in a bright, lovely 1932 building.

## Eating

Komsomolsk isn’t Russian for ‘spirited dining scene.’

**Rodnik** (☎ 531 396; pr Pervostroiteley 15; meals R500-1000; ☎ noon-3pm) Slightly formal two-floor restaurant-bar with private banquet rooms and nightly music – plus their own beer Flora on tap (R50 for a frosted mug; it’s a little sweet). More relaxed is their cheaper option **Cafe Rodnik** (pr Mira 12; ☎ 8am-11pm).

**Voshkod Cafe** (pr Pervostroiteley 31; meals R150-300) Hotel Voskhod’s 8th-floor café has good Russian meals in a simple setting.

**Pelmennay** (pr Lenina 21; meals R150-250; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Fri, 11am-7pm Sat) Old-school, pick-and-point eating.

## Getting There & Around

Between early June and the end of August, it’s possible to travel by hydrofoil to/from Khabarovsk (R466, six hours) and Nikolaevsk-na-Amure (R1350, 12 hours). At research time, boats left the **river station** (☎ 592 935) for Nikolaevsk at 7.30am and 11am.

Buses bound for Khabarovsk (R300, six hours) leave from the river station (including after the boat from Nikolaevsk arrives) and pl Lenina.

From the pink **train station** (pr Pervostroiteley), trains 67/68 run daily overnight to/from Khabarovsk (R860, 9½ hours). Heading east, trains 954 and 352 head to Vanino (R660, 18 hours), for ferries to Sakhalin. Train 964 heads west to Tynda (R1351, 37 hours).

Within the city tram 2 runs from the train station (R7), past all hotels to the river station. Bus 102 leads from the infrequently used airport (25km west of town) to the river station; a taxi there costs R250.

## NIKOLAEVSK-NA-AMURE НИКОЛАЕВСК-НА-АМУРЕ

☎ 42135 / pop 35,000 / ☎ Moscow + 7hr

Historic and humbled, the grim port town of Nikolaevsk feels like a lost corner of earth compared to Komsomolsk, 12 hours south via the northward-drifting Amur River. It’s a bit rough at the edges, with some leering locals and crumbling concrete apartment blocks mixed with more evocative wooden homes.

Named after the tsar, this shipbuilding port was founded in 1850 as a fortress near the mouth of the river and the Tatar Strait. Many convicts bound for the tsarist-era penal colony on Sakhalin Island (20km away) came through here, as did Gulag-era convicts in the 20th century. The one-time cosmopolitan flavour was wiped out by Bolsheviks, who killed any Japanese person they could find.

You may be able to get online at the library next to Hotel Sever (about R80 per hour). At the overpriced **Regional Museum** (☎ 23412; ul Gorkogo 27A; admission R140; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Wed-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun), look for the sad bust of Stalin tucked away behind a cannon, exhibits on the 2300 locals sent to the Gulags in 1937–38 alone, and 15th-century Chinese-style pottery excavated nearby.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Sever** (☎ 22174; ul Sibirskaia 117; s/d from R620/661) Chekhov couldn’t find a hotel here in 1890; you get this paint-peeling hotel. Higher-priced rooms aren’t worth the splurge; all have hot-water showers. From the river station, it’s a 20-minute walk – go past the smokestacks, turn left on ul Sovetskaya, right on ul Volodarskogo (across from a park), past ul Gorkogo a couple of blocks to the parking-lotlike pl Lenina. A taxi is about R60.

**Hotel Sever restaurant** (ul Sibirskaia 17; meals R250-350; ☎ 12.30-4.30pm & 7pm-2am) This place is, according to one waitress and our experience, ‘not bad’.

**Maestro** (ul Kantera 2; meals R150-200; ☎ 9am-4pm & 5pm-2am) This is better, just off ul Sovetskaya in the blue lighthouse centre.

## Getting There & Away

From late May through August or so, the daily hydrofoil leaves the **river station** (☎ 23297; ☎ 9am-4pm) headed for Komsomolsk (R1350,

12 hours) at 5am (a nice ride actually), and for Khabarovsk (R2330, 17 to 18 hours) at midnight. Year-round there are daily flights to Khabarovsk (R4000, 1½ hours).

## VANINO ВАНИНО

☎ 42137 / ☎ Moscow +7hr

The reason for heading some 500km east of Komsomolsk is to take the (supposedly daily in summer) ferry from Vanino to Kholmsk, on Sakhalin (around R780, 16 hours). Weather (and indecision) plagues the sailing schedule at times. If you have to wait, the **Hotel Vanino** (☎ 7473; ul Chekhova 1; s/d incl breakfast R680/900) is located above the train station (where boat tickets often attract hordes). Try calling ahead to prebook a seat from the **ferry station** (☎ 57708).

Daily trains en route to/from Sovetskaya Gavan (the next, and last, stop east) connect Vanino with Komsomolsk (R660, 18 hours). Trains 351/352 connect Vanino with Vladivostok (R1700, 41 hours) via Khabarovsk and Komsomolsk.

## OUTER FAR EAST

Looming like a tip of a giant inverted iceberg north of the BAM line, the sprawl of remote Sakha Republic (the country’s largest), Khabarovsk Territory and (further up) Magadan Region take time and effort to reach (or an air ticket). Life is noticeably different here. The buildings of Yakutsk – a friendly place where Russians are the minority – stand on stilts. Built by Gulag labour, Magadan embraces its natural setting of mountains, salmon streams and rocky beaches facing the Sea of Okhotsk.

## YAKUTSK ЯКУТСК

☎ 4112 / pop 240,000 / ☎ Moscow + 6hr

For somewhere that’s over 1000km from anywhere much, Yakutsk comes as a pleasant, and sometimes surreal, surprise. Over half of its inhabitants are Yakut – and a good portion of the remainder are Chinese immigrants – so it feels (despite the Lenin statue) less Russian than many places across the Far East. Most of its buildings stand on stilts above a cruel permafrost that never thaws. It’s most isolated when the weather’s misbehaving – as winter frozen-river highways thaw, and earth turns into an unnavigable slop.

People are particularly friendly in Yakutsk. Visitors often find themselves quickly connected with the local scene.

## History

One of the oldest cities in the Far East, Yakutsk was founded in 1632 as a Cossack fort, and later served as a base for expeditions to the Pacific coast. The most unrepentant dissidents (including Decembrists and Bolsheviks) were exiled here. It was a ‘jail without doors,’ as the swamps, mountains, ice and bug-infested forests did a pretty good job of keeping people from going anywhere. In the late 19th century, Yakutsk became a kind of ‘wild east’ version of Dodge City – a boozy, bawdy rest-and-recreation centre for the region’s increasing number of gold-miners.

Today, money is more noticeably being spent on striking modern architecture around the city, the legacy of former republic president Mikhail Nikolayev. A good example is the angular Sakha Theatre on pl Ordzhonikidze.

## Orientation & Information

The main street is pr Lenina, most of it between pl Druzhby to the west and pl Ordzhonikidze to the east. The Lena River and river boat station is east of Ordzhonikidze, the bus station on ul Oktyabrskaya just 500m north of Lenina.

There are many places to change money along pr Lenina. Call ☎ 03 in case of a health emergency.

**Globus** (☎ 423 072; pr Lenina 18; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Fri, to 7pm Sat & Sun) Excellent selection of maps of the city (R70), Sakha Republic and globby jobs of Russia.

**Post & telegraph office** (pl Ordzhonikidze; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat & Sun)

**Siberia Tour** (☎ 422 652; siberia\_tour@sakha.ru; Dom Torgovy, ul Yaroslavskogo, 4th fl; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat) Offers regional tours.

**Telephone & Internet Centre** (pr Lenina 10; ☎ 11am-2pm & 3pm-9.30pm) Best Internet connections (R55 per hour).

**Tour Service Centre** (☎ 350 897; www.yakutiatravel.com; ul Poyarkova 12; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) Experienced, helpful English-speaking staff arrange all kinds of tours of Yakutsk and Sakha. Also have a network of homestays around the republic that could make for a fascinating trip.

## Sights

A visit to the **Permafrost Institute** (Institut Merzlotovedeniya; ☎ 334 423; ul Merzlotnaya; admission



## Eating

**Tygyň Darkhan Restaurant** (Hotel Tygyň Darkhan; ul Ammosova 9; meals R500-600; ☎ 8am-10am, noon-3pm & 6-11pm) If you have just one meal in Yakutsk, come here. The place is simple enough, but has a menu filled with Yakut specialties. Locals love the *indigirka* (frozen raw fish and onions – it's like eating frozen fish in a ball of snow); far easier for the uninitiated is the fine tender fillet of *khalakhty* (colt meat) and a glass of kumis (sour horse milk).

**Buon Appetito** (☎ 321 733; ul Ikkrupskaya 37; meals R500-600; ☎ noon-2am) Hipster-stop for whisky or wood-oven pizzas (R250), with outdoor-indoor seating near the pedestrian bridge on a Lena River canal.

**Tamerlyan** (☎ 342 802; pl Ordzhonikidze; meals R200-300; ☎ 10am-midnight Mon-Thu, to 1am Fri-Sun) Mongolian BBQ meals (pick your own meats for the chef to grill) in a somewhat snazzy, self-service setting – Yakut raiders and battleaxes add to the décor. A mug of local beer is R40.

**Kafe Legenda** (☎ 420 506; pr Lenina 11; meals R150-350; ☎ 9am-11pm Mon-Sat, 11am-11pm Sun) Good for a quick, cheap snack-type meal. A burger or Central Asian rice 'n' pork bowl of *plov* is R55.

**Margarita** (☎ 435 514; pr Lenina 23; meals R500-600) Smoking locals come for the faux Tuscan décor (and imported beer) as much as the dozen OK pizzas (R180 to R250) or Japanese hand rolls (R120).

## Drinking

**Saloon** (ul Oktyabrskaya 24; ☎ 9am-7pm & 9pm-4am) At the bus station, this rather humorous drinkin' spot is a not uncousy 'Wild West' bar with cowboy paintings on the dark-wood walls.

**Korona** (☎ 424 343; pr Lenina 10; admission R500; ☎ 9am-3am or 4am Tue-Sun) A favourite new, nose-raised disco behind the telephone centre.

## Entertainment

**Opera & Ballet Theatre** (☎ 435 635; pr Lenina 46) Grand theatre with more accessible programmes than the Sakha.

**Sakha Theatre** (☎ 341 331; pl Ordzhonikidze) This strikingly modern venue has performances in Yakutian (with headphones for Russian).

## Shopping

**Sakhahult** (☎ 435 537; sakhahult@sakha-ru; pr Lenina 25; ☎ 10am-2pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sat) Long-running

shop where locals go for coats, boots and hats made of rabbit, muskrat, reindeer and other pelts. It's pricey but quality: big *norka* (mink) hats costs R2000 to R5000. A (real) reindeer Christmas ornament is R250.

## Getting There & Away

See p634 for information on the Kolyma Hwy between Yakutsk and Magadan.

### AIR

Reminding you that you are in fact in Asia, the often frantic airport, 6km northeast of centre, sends daily flights to Moscow (R15,000, six hours); four weekly connections to Khabarovsk (R6200, two hours); three weekly to Novosibirsk (R7500, four hours); two to Irkutsk (R7000, three hours), Blagoveshchensk (R8500, two hours) and Vladivostok (R8500, three hours). The weekly flight to Magadan was suspended at last pass.

The main **air ticket office** (☎ 425 782; ul Ordzhonikidze 8; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat & Sun) also sells boat tickets.

### BOAT

June through September it's possible to boat between Yakutsk and Lensk (R4000, 32 hours to Lensk, 26 hours back to Yakutsk) by hydrofoil, timed to jump on another boat to Ust-Kut on the BAM line. (It's possible the previously available direct service to Ust-Kut may resume in the future.) The boat for Lensk left at 5am Tuesday at research time. The Yakutsk **river port** (rechnoy port; ☎ 219 013), 2km northeast of the centre, has information. Cruises north to Tiksi, on the Laptev Sea, go twice a summer (R6415 each way).

At research time, service to Sottinty (R313, 2½ hours) was suspended. It normally runs twice-daily Friday to Sunday, with return times allowing a day trip.

### BUS & TAXI

Hardened souls can venture to Neryungri on a very rough 1200km highway (see p624). The Yakutsk **bus station** (avtovokzal; ☎ 355 987; ul Oktyabrskaya 24) sends buses there on Tuesday and Friday morning only (R1200, 20 to 24 hours). Slightly more regular, more expensive (and less comfortable) taxi vans to Neryungri are advertised on STS and TNT TV channels, or call ☎ 366 847.

## Getting Around

A handy city bus line is No 8 (R8) which goes past pr Lenina's hotels on its way between the river port and bus station. Bus 4 goes to the airport. Taxis charge R100 and up for most rides.

## AROUND SAKHA REPUBLIC

Many of the sites outside Yakutsk in the massive Sakha Republic (also called Sakha-Yakutia) are strung along the 4265km Lena River, a wide northward-running river that inspired a certain Vladimir to change his name to Lenin.

### Lena Pillars Ленские Столбы

Sakha Republic's top attraction are the 80km long Lena Pillars (Lenskies Stolby), a 35-million-year-old stretch of Kimberly limestone on the edge of the Lena River, about 220km south of Yakutsk. Jagged spires and picturesquely crumbling fronts (almost bricklike) look like ancient ruins if you squint. The only real way to see them is by cruise (or you could drive on the river in winter). A two-night cruise in a particularly comfy 70-cabin Austrian-made ship costs about US\$400/700 (single/double). Trips leave Yakutsk Tuesday and Friday (around 7pm) from June to September; weekends can be tighter. Meal deals are R1200 extra.

You'll have plenty of time (five to eight hours) at the pillars to climb up for sweeping views. The trip is quite laid back. Most Russians go to see the pillars a bit, sing

some karaoke in the bar, and maybe fish from shore. It's best to book places ahead via a Yakutsk tour agency. You could ask about paying the cheaper Russian rate.

### Bakaldyn Бакалдын

In the taiga, 46km northwest of Yakutsk, is Bakaldyn, a family-run Evenki ethnographic complex and base for reindeer-pulled sledge rides. Day trips here are around US\$50, and seven-day sledge tours in winter can be arranged too. See p627 for tour agency details. The complex sometimes moves south in the summer months; check with a travel agent beforehand.

Even without the snow it's still a great place to learn more about the Evenki culture and shamanism in an appropriate setting. You can trek through the forest to find grazing reindeer, learn how to lasso one, and try on the lightweight but warm reindeer coats and hats.

### Sottinty Соттинцы

At this village on the Lena River, 60km north of Yakutsk, is the **Druzhba Historical Park** with a collection of original wooden buildings, Yakutian and Russian. There are hydrofoils that take you part of the way, but they don't run to a regular schedule any more and the park itself, a state-run enterprise, has erratic opening times. If you want to visit here, contact one of the Yakutsk tour agencies. It's about US\$85 per person (including ferry, guide and meals) for a group of four.

## IT'S AS COLD AS SIBERIA HERE

When thermometers dip as far below zero as they go above, and as many as two out of three days of your life is spent slipping on snow, you make some adjustments. In many towns around the Far East, hot-water pipes are elevated above the damaging permafrost below. Giant fur coats aren't fashion but (an expensive) necessity.

Since *perestroika*, many Siberian and Far Eastern towns have seen a rise in heated garages, as locals now enjoy owning cars and need a place to keep them warm. Cars must run constantly when outdoors – that means leaving it running when stopping off for a new supply of *kolbasa*. 'If your engine goes off, that's it – you have to wait till spring,' one local warned.

One problem, seen in some towns, is cracked or blackened teeth, which happens – over time – when drinking hot tea or coffee in temperatures 30 or 40 degrees below zero.

But one Yakutsk local shrugged off the winters, 'Twenty or 30 below is no problem, but I don't know how they live in Oymyakon at 50 below.'

Life certainly doesn't stop in winter. Travel options actually improve – riverways freeze offering new 'roads' to reach otherwise isolated areas. Contact travel agents about potentially exciting cross-country skiing, dogsledding and ice fishing trips or about just going to places where 'you can't hammer a nail into a frozen banana'.





water in a private bathroom. There's a bar on the 2nd floor.

Other options:

**Hotel Magadan** (☎ 99557; ul Proletarskaya 8, 5th fl; s/d from R700/800) Smaller rooms, older bathrooms.

**Okean Hotel** (☎ 31085; ul Portovaya 36/10; s/d R850/1200) A heartbroken, old Soviet grey monster facing the sea.

## Eating

**Toragi** (☎ 24795; ul Pushkina 1; meals R200-400; ☎ noon-10pm) This appealing eight-table restaurant serves a mix of Korean and Central Asian meals. The *kuksu* (beef-and-cabbage soup with noodles) is great.

**Sloboda** (☎ 22962; pr Karla Marksa 36/20; meals R300-500; ☎ noon-2am) Small Russian restaurant proud of its 'hangover cure' soup and Cossack-styled chicken breast (R90).

**Supermarket** (pr Karla Marksa 48; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon-Sat, to 9pm Sun) Big grocery store.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The airport is 61km northeast in the town of Sokol. Direct services connect Magadan with Khabarovsk (R5000, 2½ hours, three weekly), Krasnoyarsk (R9900, two weekly), Moscow (about R15,000 to R18,000, four weekly), Petropavlovsk (R3000, 1½ hours, one weekly), and Vladivostok (R4500, three hours, two weekly). The less-popular flight to Yakutsk was suspended at research time.

**Admiral-Tur** (☎ 23496; ul Portovaya 1; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) can help with domestic and international tickets.

### BUS & TRUCK

The Magadan **bus station** (☎ 22897; cnr pr Lenina & ul Proletarskaya) has daily bus services around the region; the furthest route goes to Susuman (R1010, 10 hours), on the way to Yakutsk. Bus 111 goes to the airport from here (R55, 70 minutes) every 45 minutes or so from 6.30am to 8.30pm.

One of the great 'extreme' trips is a rough multiday trip between Magadan and Yakutsk (2200km west) on the Kolyma Hwy, the so-called 'road of bones,' in reference to the many Gulag prisoners who perished building it. It's most reliably travelled along the frozen Indigirka River in winter (after December, about two days); spring and summer conditions (6WD only) can turn the road to impassable slop

(slushy May is an outright no-go) – other times it'll take at least four days. Hitching isn't recommended as we've heard many unlicensed gold prospectors create a somewhat criminal atmosphere, though technically it's possible to hitch from Susuman or Magadan. Hiring a vehicle from Magadan will cost about US\$2000 (in winter) to US\$4000 (in summer).

## CHUKOTKA ЧУКОТКА

Brushing its (icy) nose with Alaska's, the Chukotka peninsula is Russia's (and Asia's) most northeastern tip – and seriously 'out there'. Backed by eroded mountains of permafrost (some as high as 1800m), Chukotka is almost solely inhabited by indigenous peoples, including the Chukchi, Evenki, Yupik and Chuvantsi. Coming on a tour simplifies permit headaches and can get you to traditional villages and offshore to witness whales and walrus. Famously, Roman Abramovich (the Chelsea Football Club owner and governor of Chukotka) has poured a lot of money into the region in recent years.

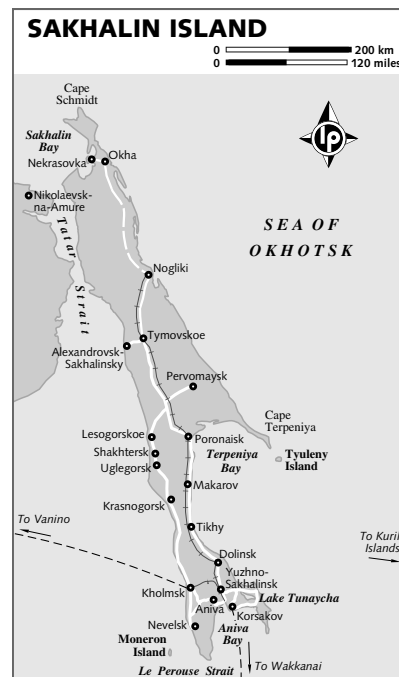
The main two access points are Anadyr and Provideniya, where a number of US-based tours come by charter flight via Nome, Alaska (June to August). Check [www.chukotka.org](http://www.chukotka.org) for more information. There are weekly flights from Moscow, monthly from Khabarovsk.

**Circumpolar Expeditions** (☎ 907-2720 9299; [www.arctictravel.net/tourprov.htm](http://www.arctictravel.net/tourprov.htm); Anchorage, Alaska), has four-/12-day trips for US\$1300/3500. Moscow-based **Tours to Russia** (☎ 495-921 8027; [www.tourstorussia.com](http://www.tourstorussia.com)) offer 18-day rafting trips from US\$900.

## SAKHALIN ISLAND ОСТРОВ САХАЛИН

Fought for, lost, won, debated over, called 'hell' by a literary great, sought after by oil-eyed businessfolk – Sakhalin is the 948km-long heart of the Sakhalinskaya Oblast (Sakhalin Region) which includes 59 islands, including Moneron Island and the disputed Kuril Islands. By map, the area looks pretty darn Japanese but since WWII, the region has been all Russian.

Most visitors – and there are many – are here on business, with rigs off Sakhalin's



northern shores pulling millions of dollars of crude oil. Travellers will find getting far very difficult (and costly) – but if they do, there's great natural beauty (three-quarters of Sakhalin is wild terrain of forests and mountains, islands of seals, bears wandering around 1500m mountain tops, clear rivers to fish, slopes to ski). March to June can be wet and grey, mid-September and October brings on foliage.

Beyond that, Sakhalin is a bit of an enigma. It's seven time zones from Moscow, but some locals like to claim about 95% of all revenue goes to the capital. Even gas plucked from its reserves goes to Komsomolsk and Khabarovsk by pipeline, and is then sold back to the island at inflated prices. Russian transplants from Moscow and St Petersburg complain that life is harder and more costly than back home.

It has the makings of a liberalised port on the Asian front. A glimpse of a 1930s photo shows members of the *komsomol* of different races side by side, and today lunching Russians walk the pavements with Korean Russians (who constitute 10% of the popula-

tion, most descendants of force labourers – aka 'slaves' – brought by the Japanese during WWII). Yet the booming island has a flair for ultraconservative, pro-Russian politics. A 2004 survey showed the island had a 60% support rating for Stalin!

## History

The first Japanese settlers came across from Hokkaido in the early 1800s, attracted by marine life so rich that one explorer wrote 'the water looked as though it was boiling'. The island already had occupants in the form of the Nivkhi, Oroki and Ainu peoples but, just as this didn't give pause to the Japanese, the Russians were equally heedless when they claimed Sakhalin in 1853. Japan agreed to recognise Russian sovereignty in exchange for the rights to the Kuril Islands.

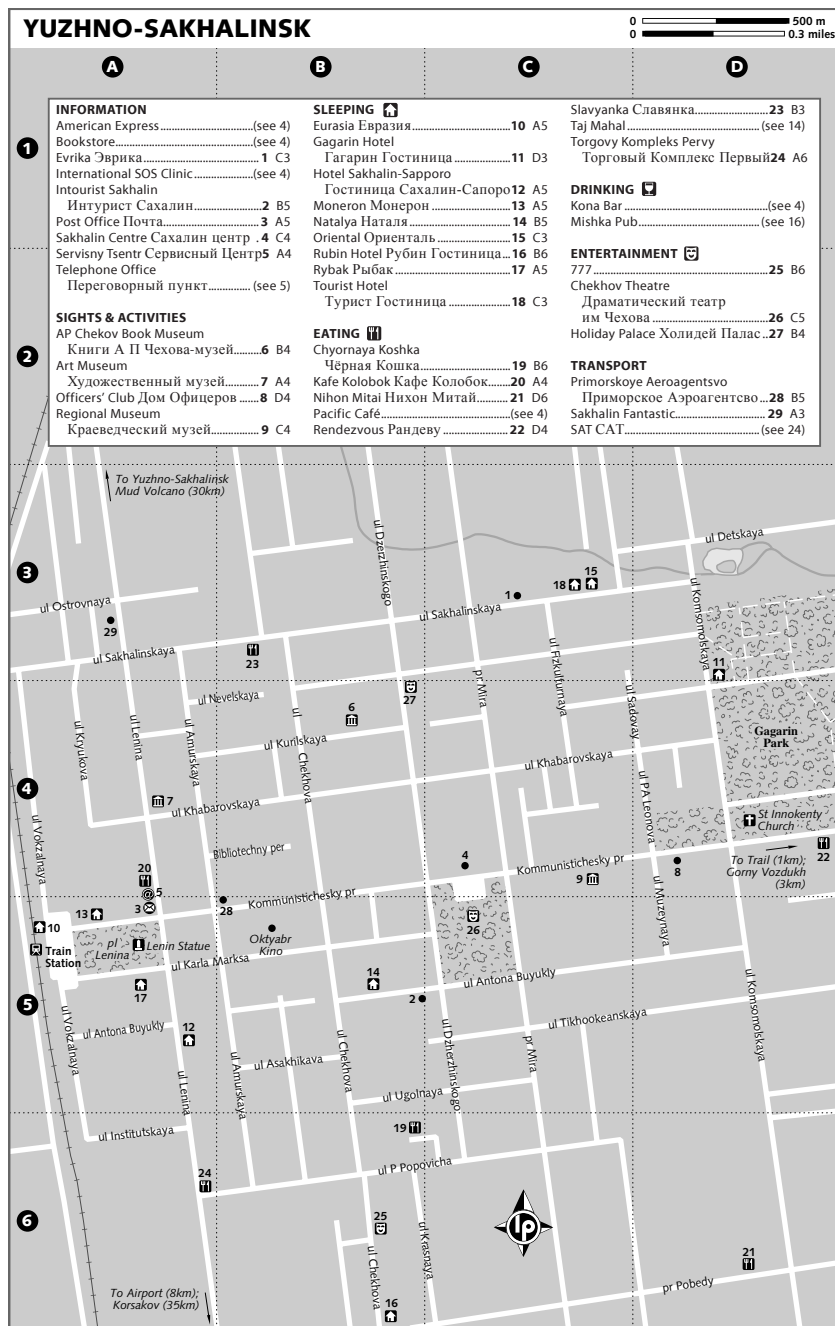
In 1882 the tsar made the remote island into one huge penal colony. Anton Chekhov visited in 1890, resulting in his *A Journey to Sakhalin*, in which he wrote: 'I have seen Ceylon which is paradise and Sakhalin which is hell.' (Though he said Sakhalin's experiences influenced all his writing thereafter.)

Japan restaked its claim, seizing the island during the Russo-Japanese War and getting to keep the southern half, which they called Karafuto, under the terms of the Treaty of Portsmouth, 1905. In the final days of WWII, though, the Soviet Union staged a successful invasion of the island. Sakhalin became a highly militarised eastern outpost of the Soviet empire, loaded with aircraft, missiles and guns. Just how sensitive Sakhalin had become was illustrated in 1983, when the off-course Korean Airlines flight 007 was shot down by the Russians. All 267 on board were killed.

## YUZHNO-SAKHALINSK ЮЖНО-САХАЛИНСК

☎ 4242 / pop 240,000 / ☎ Moscow +7hr

Sprawling between mountains, landlocked Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk is the booming capital of Sakhalin. At times on its main strips (ul Lenina or Kommunistichesky pr – still keeping Marx happy with newly made street signs) you have to struggle to see Russia. There's not a lot to do – that is if you're not in town bound for oil rigs or construction projects – but it's a good (and the only)



starting point to the rest of the relatively unexplored island or the Kuril Islands, and it offers some flashy restaurants and bars.

## History

Vladimirovka (Yuzhno's first of three names) was basically a hamlet of convicts when the Japanese renamed it Toiohara and developed it into a thriving township. After WWII, the USSR Russified the new centre (main Russian communities were further north), renaming it Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk (Southern Sakhalin).

In 1990 the city achieved international fame as the site of the 'Sakhalin experiment,' when new governor, Muscovite Valentin Fyodorov, vowed to create capitalism on the island. He privatised retail trade and transformed the communist HQ into a business centre, but most people soon found themselves poorer. Fyodorov high-tailed it back to Moscow in 1993.

The demise of the Soviet Union and the influx of thousands of expat oil-industry people and their entourages have achieved what Fyodorov couldn't. New businesses are opening up all the time and there are several shiny new joint-venture buildings in the town.

## Orientation

The town's main axis, running roughly north-south, is ul Lenina with pl Lenina and the train station at its midpoint. Kommunisticheskaya pr runs east from the square.

## MAPS

Cyrillic maps of the city and region are available at bookshops (K85 each).

## Information

### BOOKSHOPS

**Bookstop** (Sakhalin Centre, Kommunisticheskaya pr 32; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 11am-3pm Sat) A few English-language books available.

**Evrika** (ul Sakhalinskaya 8; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat, to 5pm Sun) Sells maps and coffee-table style volumes on the island (from R240 to R2000).

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Pacific Cafe** (Kommunisticheskaya pr 32; per hr R100;

☎ 8am-8pm) Wi-fi access.

**Servisny Tsentr** (Service Centre; ☎ 721 672; ul Lenina 220; per hr R60; ☎ 10am-8pm)

## MEDIA

**Sakhalin Times** (www.sakhalintimes.ru) Weekly English-language newspaper distributed at the major hotels and Sakhalin Centre.

**Sovietski Sakhalin** Local Russian-language paper still carries the USSR name.

## MEDICAL SERVICES

**International SOS Clinic** (☎ 727 550, 499 911; Sakhalin Centre basement, Kommunisticheskaya pr 32) English-language doctors attend to emergency needs around the clock.

## MONEY

Currency can be exchanged at several banks and ATMs are abundant.

**American Express** (☎ 499 693; Sakhalin Centre, room 405) Russia's third Amex office (after Moscow and St Petersburg).

**Sakhalin Centre** (Kommunisticheskaya pr 32; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri) Money is exchanged at Bank Moscow in the basement. The ATM in the lobby gives rubles or dollars from 6am to 11pm.

## POST

**Post office** (pl Lenina; ☎ 8am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat & Sun)

## TELEPHONE

**Telephone office** (ul Lenina; ☎ 7.30am-10pm) Between the post office and Internet centre.

## TRAVEL AGENCIES

Really the only way to get around the island is on a guided tour. These agencies can tailor trips.

**Intourist Sakhalin** (☎ 424 386; intourist-sakhalin@isle.ru; ul Dzerzhinskogo 36, office 207;

☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Long-running agency offering group tours. Were a little less helpful at last pass, but should be able to help you get to the Kurils.

**Sakhalin Outdoor Club** (trio@sakhalin.su) Sasha Dashersky is one of the city's most knowledgeable guides, and offers many entertaining trips, such as day and overnight fishing trips to Tambuka River, 80km south (from US\$200 per person). A five-day trip to the Chamgu Pass includes hiking up a 1510m mountain with the option of summer skiing (US\$800 to US\$1200 per person).

## Sights & Activities

Home to the Karafuto administration before the USSR seized the island from the Japanese in 1945, the pagoda-roofed **Regional Museum** (☎ 727 555; Kommunisticheskaya pr 29; admission R70, photo/video permit R50/70; ☎ 11am-5pm



Tue, to 6pm Wed-Sun) is the city's best museum. On the 1st floor are photos of the island's (and the Kurils') natural features and Chekhov-era prisons, plus 19th century seal-hide tunics worn by the Ainu (some of the island's indigenous population). The wildlife room – a taxidermy-rama – features a seal exhibit complete with a model of a bird dung-splattered cliff. Upstairs highlights the Soviet days – best is the photo of the 1931 *komsomol* group with a mix of races sitting sides by side. A small Korean exhibit has recently been added. It's all in Cyrillic (except for details in English on how to purchase art in the gallery).

Next door, at the old **Officers' Club** (Dom Ofitserov), a jet fighter overlooks nine armoured vehicles and cannons: a free climbing zone for the area's tots.

Scrappy but loved, the 220-acre **Gagarin Park**, at the city's east side, is Yuzhno's greenest hang-out spot, with loads of rides, shaded walkways and free concerts in summer, at 2pm Sunday.

Nearby, from the east end of Kommunistichesky pr, is a **trail** you can climb for a view of town (and the smokestacks), which is near the **Gorny Vozdukh** ski area in winter. Head south at ul Gorkogo, then follow the trail to the east.

The **Art Museum** (☎ 722 925; ul Lenina 137; admission R30; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is in another Japanese-era building. Its permanent collection (on the 2nd floor) features Japanese and Korean textiles, plus 100-year-old Russian art. The best (usually) is part of the temporary exhibit downstairs.

Devoted to Chekhov's 1890 visit to Sakhalin, the **AP Chekhov Book Museum** (☎ 423 349; ul Kuril'skaya 42; admission R15; ☎ 11am-6pm Tue-Sat) was closed for renovation at last pass. It's supposedly going to expand from its small collection of photos and artwork.

## Sleeping

The island's oil boom has tapped out the hotel infrastructure, meaning booking ahead is almost essential (particularly in summer). If you choose to, savvy hotels charge a 10% to 20% fee. Sadly homestays are not commonly arranged; ask a travel agent, who may be able to hook you up for R1500 to R2000 per night.

The airport **info booth** (☎ 788 390) can help find a room on arrival.

## BUDGET

In a rare perverse sense of justice, the cheapies have the best location.

**Moneron** (☎ 714 323; fax 723 454; Kommunistichesky pr 86; s/d R800/1000) This sky-blue building facing pl Lenina and the train station is the best cheapie. The location's great, the rooms small, the staff friendly, the (shared) toilets clean, the (shared) shower (note lack of plural) situation a bit enigmatic (it costs R25; ask at room 343). Rooms have TV, sink and refrigerator.

**Rybak** (☎ 723 768; fax 722 712; ul Karla Marksa 51; s/d R1050/1400, lyux R2200-2650) Across the square, this place has less enigmatic shared bathrooms, and slightly more updated rooms. Luxury rooms have private bathrooms (with panda bear toilet covers). Rooms have TV and refrigerator.

## MIDRANGE

Most hotels in this range are priced to bring sarcastic laughter. Laugh, then submit. At all you'll get TV, phone and private bathroom with hot water.

**Gagarin Hotel** (☎ 498 400; gagarinhotel@yahoo.com; ul Komsomolskaya 133; s/d R3500/4000) Popular with business travellers, the Gagarin is a notch up from other slightly cheaper options. Quite mod toilets, fancy doors. The tiny basement bar is guarded by a dinosaur robot.

**Tourist Hotel** (☎ 467 811; ul Sakhalinskaya 2; incl breakfast R3000, lyux s/d R5000/5200) This new hotel, in a less appealing area of town (though near Gagarin Park), is a well-done conversion of an old building with stylish rooms, but there's no lift for its four floors.

**Oriental** (☎ 721 972; orientalsakhalin@mail.ru; ul Sakhalinskaya 2A; s/d R2400/3400) Looking a bit haggardly next to the Tourist, the Oriental's rooms are clean, the Korean-Russian staff is friendly, and there's free billiards.

**Natalya** (☎ 36683; fax 462 701; ul Antona Buyukly 38; s/d incl breakfast from R3500/4700) Fine modern rooms on a side street.

**Eurasia** (☎ 713 560; eurtur@sakmail.sakhalin.ru; ul Vokzal'naya 54; s/d R2300/2400) Connected to the train station, and a glory of grey outside, the friendly Eurasia has clunky but reasonably well-kept rooms (some with hilariously retro carpets).

## TOP END

**Rubin Hotel** (☎ 422 212; www.rubinhotel.ru, in Russian; ul Chekhova 85; s/d from R5500/6200) New three-

storey hotel on the backstreets justifies the extra R1500 on its price tag with a kitchen in all rooms. Mishka Pub in the basement is a popular pub-style expat hangout.

**Hotel Sakhalin-Sapporo** (☎ 721 560; fax 723 889; ul Lenina 181; s/d incl breakfast R4372/4922) Surely poorly paid prison architects could've outdone the exterior (a white brick boxy cube), but the Sapporo is swankier inside – with all rooms upgraded for Japanese tourist standards – and its restaurant is tip-top.

## Eating

### RUSSIAN

**Kafe Kolobok** (ul Lenina 218; meals R80-150; ☎ 8am-7pm) This quick self-service eatery – a modern take on the Russian *stolovaya* (cafeteria) – serves excellent food (omelettes, goulash, salads, pork cutlets, bliny and happy breakfast bowls of *kasha*) for dirt cheap.

**Slavyanka** (☎ 429 667; ul Sakhalinskaya 45; meals R500-750; ☎ noon-4pm & 5pm-10pm) *Matryoshka* dolls and wooden spoons encircle (mostly Russian) diners at this homy, eight-table restaurant that fills for all meals. The stage sees a balalaika trio from 6pm or 7pm nightly. Food's good and there's an English menu.

**Chyornaya Kosha** (☎ 420 263; ul Chekhova 43A; dishes R750-1300; ☎ noon-11pm) Tucked behind a pavilion of drab housing blocks, the new 'Black Cat' is a very popular eatery for wine-sipping locals dining on big portions of beef, pork, fish and – ! – Mexican *quesadillas* (cheese pastries) or Spanish paella. Reserve on weekends.

### WESTERN & ASIAN

Take expat repellent if you're looking for independence.

**Pacific Cafe** (Kommunistichesky pr 32; meals R250; ☎ 8am-8pm) In the Sakhalin Centre, this all-Western standard self-serve café is a de facto business meeting point. A full American breakfast is R160, while pizza slices (from R60) get rolling later on. The machine-made espresso is R50 – OK, but probably not what you're looking for.

**Nihon Mitai** (☎ 551 901; pr Pobedy 288; meals R500-750; ☎ noon-10pm) The smoke-filled, slick sushi bar sends sushi around in twos (from R30 to R180). Soba noodles are R200. Fish is fresh; we just hope grumpy management will follow suit.

**Rendezvous** (☎ 429 434; Kommunistichesky pr 15A; meals R300-400; ☎ noon-2am) This small, window-

less, modern parlour-style place serves tasty, authentic Korean food. Squid fans should try *odinopokum* (squid with chilli paste and rice). Photo menu, with some English.

**Taj Mahal** (☎ 499 488; ul Antona Buyukly 38; meals R350-500; ☎ 11.30-2.30pm & 5.30-10.30pm Mon-Thu, 11.30am-2.30pm & 5.30pm-midnight Fri & Sat, 11.30am-10pm Sun) Happy place with colourful murals and very good Indian curries – plenty of veggie items.

## SELF-CATERING

**Torgovy Kompleks Pervy** (cnr uls Lenina & Popovicha; ☎ 24hr) Well-stocked supermarket.

## Drinking

**Kona Bar** (Sakhalin Centre, Kommunistichesky pr 32; ☎ 11am-midnight) Dancing girls at 9pm should give an idea of who visits: oil-talking businessmen. It's not really that seedy, with cut-off ties hanging over the entry and enough bamboo to house the homeless of Hokkaido. You can bring in pizza from Pacific Cafe. A half-litre mug of beer is R75.

**Mishka Pub** (☎ 422 811; ul Chekhova 85; ☎ noon-midnight Sun-Thu, to 1am Fri & Sat) Here in the small basement bar of Rubin Hotel, rugby-watching expats chew on cheeseburgers (R185) and down beer (R35 to R125).

## Entertainment

**Holiday Palace** (☎ 728 489; ul Dzerzhinskogo 21; admission R150-200; ☎ 9pm-4am or 5am) Upstairs in the monolith that is the Holiday Palace Entertainment Complex, the Holiday is a popular disco. There's also a casino.

**777** (☎ 429 462; ul Chekhova 71) Another popular disco.

**Chekhov Theatre** (☎ 505 235; ul Kommunistichesky; tickets R250-400) Across from the Sakhalin Centre, the Chekhov irregularly holds popular music comedy shows.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The airport is 8km south of the centre. There are daily flights to/from Khabarovsk (R4300, 1½ hours), Moscow (R8000 to R12,000, nine hours) and Vladivostok (R5700, two hours), and to Kunashir on the Kuril Islands four times weekly (R6600 return) and once weekly to Komsomolsk (R4750, 1½ hours). There are also less-regular flights to Blagoveshchensk, Irkutsk, Krasnoyarsk, Novosibirsk and St Petersburg.

In addition to domestic flights, **SAT** (☎ 422 782; Kommunistichesky pr 49; ✈ 10am-7pm) flies three times weekly to/from Hakodate (US\$360, two hours) and twice weekly to Sapporo (US\$360, 1½ hours), both on the Japanese island of Hokkaido; and five times weekly to Seoul (US\$390, three hours). There's an international departure tax of around R600, payable on check-in.

You can buy domestic or international tickets at **Primorskoye Aeroagentstvo** (☎ 437 474; Kommunistichesky pr 74; ✈ 8am-7pm).

### BOAT & BUS

Boat services leave from various ports around southern Sakhalin. Buses (about R60) leave for the port towns regularly from outside the Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk train station.

From April to December, ferries run to Wakkanai on Hokkaido (from US\$182 one way, five hours) from Korsakov. Book tickets at **Sakhalin Fantastic** (☎ /fax 420 917; www.sakhalin-fantastic.ru; ul Lenina 154, room 502; ✈ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri). Bus 115 runs every half hour to Korsakov. Microbuses stop at the port; bigger ones stop inland, where you'll need to grab a local bus to the water.

Leave-when-full ferries head regularly to Vanino (and the BAM rail line) on the mainland from Kholmsk. For ferry information from Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, call ☎ 8233-66098 or 8233-66516 a day ahead to snag a space and find departure times (R760 to R1021, 14 hours). It's *not* easy arranging this by phone. To reach Kholmsk, take bus 518. The bus continues on to Nevelsk, where (expensive) charter boats sail to Moneron Island. Boats need to be prebooked through an agent in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk.

Bus 111 leaves regularly for Aniva, a kilometre from the water. A bay-direct summer bus leaves from 777 (ul Chekhova).

### TRAIN

From the often-quiet train station, facing pl Lenina, the fastest train is 1, which heads north at 6.55pm daily, stopping at Tymovskoe (R992, 12½ hours) and the end of the line Nogliki (R1193, 14½ hours). Train 2 comes back, leaving Nogliki daily at 3pm and leaving Tymovskoe at 7.40pm.

### Getting Around

Although Yuzhno is compact enough to walk around, *marshrutky* run regular routes

about the city, most leaving from the train station. Bus 63 leaves for the airport from in front of Kino Oktyabr, bus 68 from outside the telephone centre (R9, 30 minutes). A taxi from the train station to the airport will cost around R200.

### AROUND SAKHALIN ISLAND

Locals like to say Japan held the island's southern half from 1905 to 1945 because it's the pretty part. Further north, trees are shorter, temperatures cooler – 'it's just tundra up there,' said a proud southerner. Most who go are oil folks (workers and managers). All over the island, wide pockets of nature – off the main rail or road links – endure relatively unexplored (particularly great for fishing and trekking), though sadly little of the glory is easily available to the independent traveller on public transport. Hiring a car from a travel agent is costly (try US\$17 per hour – no discounts for extended use).

See p627 for some travel agents that can tailor trips here. You could try to pay a friendly local gas money to check some daytrip sights out.

Note: places such as Aleksandrovsk-Sakhalinsky and Tambovka River require a *propusk* (special border permit); a travel agent can help arrange one.

### Southern Sakhalin

Fishers should contact the **Sakhalin Outdoor Club** (trio@sakhalin.su) for day or overnight camping trips to their private Tambovka River to fish cherry salmon, East Siberian char and the catch-and-release taimen (from US\$200).

### LAKE TUNAYCHA ОЗЕРО ТУНАЙЧА

One of the nicest places to go to from Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk is the Lake Tunaycha region in the extreme southeast, where there's a string of lakes, some only separated from the sea by narrow causeways a few metres wide. For its shallowness, locals call it the 'warm lake,' and some wind-surfers have sought gusts here. Many birds come here during the migrating seasons and the coastline is favoured by seals. Amber gets washed up on the beaches, and it's a favourite place for locals to go crab hunting and camping.

Tunaycha is 45km southwest of Yuzhno.

### YUZHNO-SAKHALINSK MUD VOLCANO

ЮЖНО-САХАЛИНСКИЙ ГРЯЗЕВОЙ ВУЛКАН Sakhalin doesn't actually have any volcanoes, but this 6-hectare field of volcanic mud appeared in the midst of the forest, some 30km north of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk near the village of Klyuchi, in 1959. Another big eruption of mud occurred in 2002, following an earthquake in the region, and the ground here still bubbles with small fumaroles.

It can only be reached by privately arranged transport via a hill track (about 90 minutes), though it's possible you could hike here with a guide.

### KORSAKOV КОРСАКОВ

About 40km south of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk is the grimy port of Korsakov, centre of the island's hugely profitable fishing industry, and the place to come for the ferry to Wakkanai on Hokkaido and to Kunsahir of the Kuril Islands. Bus 115 comes here from Yuzhno's train station regularly (R60, 90 minutes). The lone hotel is **Alfa** (☎ 8235-41010; ul Krasnoflotskaya 3).

### ANIVA АНИВА

This simple, mostly wooden town, about 50km southwest of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, is just inland from the wide Aniva Bay – and actually can be reached via bus 111 from the Yuzhno train station. As beaches go, it's Sakhalin's best – but not great: a stretch of slightly trashy brown sand facing (often) grey water. Locals set up tents much of the year (peaking in August) for a little fishing, maybe a swim, and a lot of drinking.

### KHOLMSK ХОЛМСК

Southern Sakhalin's other major port, Kholmsk, 40km west, is where ferries connect the island with Vanino on the mainland. If you're awaiting a ride (likely), sleep at **Hotel Kholmsk** (☎ 42433-52854; fax 51824; ul Sovetskaya 60; r R700-1200).

### MONERON ISLAND ОСТРОВ МОНЕРОН

In the Tatar Strait, 50km southwest of Sakhalin, is the largely uninhabited Moneron Island, surrounded by a marine park popular with divers and snorkellers. Unfortunately an increase of poaching has wreaked havoc on the underwater world, but it's still possible to go. Many birds – such as black-tailed gulls and long-billed guillemot –

flock here. You must charter a boat that leaves from Nevelsk (south of Kholmsk, also reached by bus 518 from Yuzhno). Inquire with travel agents (p637).

### Central & Northern Sakhalin

Daily trains connect Yuzhno with Tikhy, Poronaysk, Tymovskoe and Nogliki, nearly 15 hours north. To get anywhere but some grisly towns on the line usually requires pre-arranged (and costly) transport. See opposite for information on trains heading north.

### TIKHY ТИХИИ

Heading two hours north from Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk (about 135km) brings you to Tikhy, where the Zhdanko Mountains drop into the ocean in volcanic-rock formations and hardened lava flows. Ask an agent about camping tours along the dramatic coastline here. A good two- or three-day hike leads over a pass to north.

### ALEKSANDROVSK-SAKHALINSKY

АЛЕКСАНДРОВСК-САХАЛИНСКИЙ About two-thirds up the island, the train stops at Tymovsk (the station for Tymovskoe town). Here, a bus *usually* waits before departing for Aleksandrovsk-Sakhalinsky on the west coast (two hours). Chekhov spent most of his time here during his 1890 visit (the house is now a small museum). Little is left of the penal camps he wrote about, but the rugged coastline is attractive. There's a simple hotel. In a pinch, you can stay at the **Agrolitsey** (☎ 8247-21636; ul Sovetskaya 4) in Tymovskoe. The daily train 2 returns to Yuzhno (R992, 12 hours) at 7.40pm.

### NOGLIKI НОГЛИКИ

The train terminates at this drab town, which hardly seems to have benefited from the billions of dollars being sunk on oil-drilling platforms anchored just offshore. The town centre is 5km from the station; *marshrutky* run there regularly. In town, the comfortable **Hotel Nogliki** (☎ 42444-96805; fax 96865; ul Sovetskaya 6; s/d US\$82/97) often fills its rooms with oil-industry guests.

The daily train 2 heads back to Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk (R1193, 14½ hours) at 3pm.

### OKHA & NEKRASOVKA ОХА И НЕКРАСОВКА

An irregular 6WD bus service meets on-coming trains in Nogliki for a service to

Okha, a 250km dirt-road ride north. We heard it's best to prearrange transport with a Yuzhno travel agent. Okha, another ugly oil-town base, is 28km from the village of Nekrasovka, home to over a thousand Nivkhi (over half of the island's remaining population). The village holds traditional holiday festivals in early January and mid-to-late June; at any other time it's depressing to visit.

## KURIL ISLANDS КУРИЛЬСКИЕ ОСТРОВА

The stunningly beautiful, rugged 56-island chain of the Kuril Islands arc like stepping stones between the southern tip of Kamchatka and the Japanese island of Hokkaido. The islands, which form part of the Pacific 'Ring of Fire', are actually the tips of a volcanic mountain range. Among the peaks protruding from the sea are 49 active volcanoes, many of which erupt frequently and violently. Of these, Mt Tyatya is considered to be the most picturesque. The islands are indeed stunningly beautiful, with circular azure-blue lagoons, steaming rivers and hot springs, boiling lakes such as Lake Kupashi, the moon-like landscape of Mendelyev volcano, and some spectacular cliff formations, notably the Stolbchaty Cape.

Plan way ahead on a trip as fog delays, permits and lack of infrastructure make a solo trip all but impossible. A one-week visit (not including delays) should cost from US\$800 to US\$1500. A permit takes at least three days to arrange in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and costs about US\$50. Contact Intourist (p637) in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk for information.

As a geographic link between Russia and Japan, the Kurils have only been a wedge politically. A treaty of 1855 divided possession of the chain between Russia and Japan; the latter received the islands of Habomai, Shikotan, Kunashir and Etorofu. A second treaty, in 1875, gave Tokyo sovereignty over the whole lot in exchange for recognising the Russians' right to Sakhalin. But then, in the last days of WWII, the Soviets reneged on the deal and invaded the Kurils. For three years the new Russian settlers and the existing Japanese residents lived side-by-side, but in 1948 Stalin ordered all the Japanese to

leave. The Kurils have been a diplomatic minefield between the two nations ever since and, technically, Japan and Russia have never concluded a peace treaty after WWII because of them.

The main centre is Yuzhno-Kurilsk on Kunashir, the southernmost and most accessible of the islands; here you'll find the **Storitel Hotel** (☎ 8255-21689) where tour groups get put up. Other centres are Severo-Kurilsk on Paramushir Island and Kurilsk on Iturup Island.

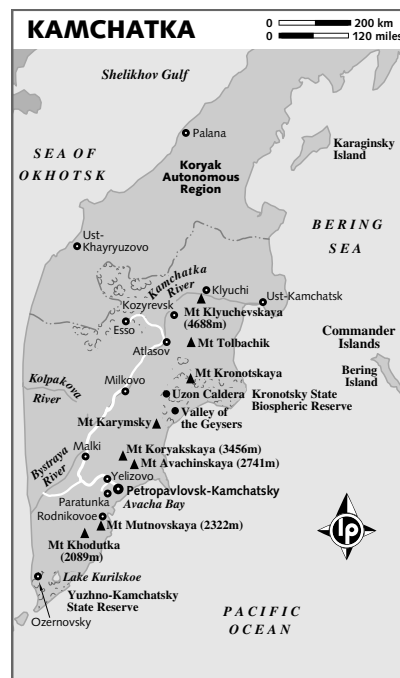
## Getting There & Away

This can be tricky. Thick fog wreathes the islands all too regularly. And the airport works on vision only (no radar). To be safe, count on a delay of up to five days or a week getting to or off the islands – this goes for boats too. Five weekly flights connect Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk with Yuzhno-Kurilsk on Kunashir (R6000, 1¼ hours). A travel agent may be able to help you go by a ferry from Korsakov (about US\$200 return, 24 hours).

# KAMCHATKA КАМЧАТКА

Dangling across from Alaska between the Sea of Okhotsk and the Bering Sea, the 1000km-long Kamchatka Peninsula (also known as Kamchatskaya oblast) is without doubt one of Russia's – and possibly the world's – most beautiful regions. A 'mini-Alaska,' Kamchatka is more often called, accurately, the 'land of fire and ice'. It boasts more than 200 volcanoes that bubble, spurt and spew in a manner that suggests that Creation hasn't quite finished yet. Hikes up them take you through lush (mosquito-filled) forest, over clear streams filled with salmon, and past herds of reindeer to fields of hardened lava so unworldly that the Soviet space program tested 'moonwalker' vehicles here.

Still awakening from its closed-off days under the USSR, Kamchatka is simply an adventure traveller's dream – well, adventure travellers with money and time. The best attractions are well away from the hub Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. Many places require a 6WD, a helicopter or a couple of



days' hike. The help of a local travel agency and guide is crucial.

August is the peak travel season, though winter trips are equally enticing. Be prepared for varying conditions – and potential delays. We've sunk in groin-deep snow on volcano tops in July; fog is common in Petropavlovsk, often grounding helicopter rides and even boat trips.

## History

The man credited with the discovery of Kamchatka, in 1696, was the half-Cossack, half-Yakut adventurer Vladimir Atlasov who, like most explorers of the time, was out to find new lands to plunder. He established two forts on the Kamchatka River that became bases for the Russian traders who followed.

The native Koryaks, Chukchi and Itelmeni warred with their new self-appointed overlords, but fared badly and their numbers were greatly diminished. Today, the remnants of the Chukchi nation inhabit the isolated northeast of Kamchatka, while the Koryaks live on the west coast of the

peninsula with their territorial capital at Palana. There's also a community of Even, related to the Evenki of the Sakha Republic, based around Esso, where they migrated to some 150 years ago. Some of these peoples still maintain a traditional existence as reindeer-herders and hunters of various sea creatures, the animals being a source of food and raw materials for clothing. While much of their culture and language have been lost, the tradition of storytelling through mime, dance and song has survived; see p651.

Kamchatka was long regarded as the least hospitable place in the Russian Empire – half a year's journey away and with nothing to offer beyond a dwindling supply of furs. When Alaska was sold off in 1867, Kamchatka might also have been up for grabs if the Americans had shown enough interest.

During the Cold War, Kamchatka took on new strategic importance and foreign interest was definitely no longer welcome. It became a base for military airfields and early-warning radar systems, while the coastline sheltered parts of the Soviet Pacific Fleet. Isolated regions of Kamchatka also served as target areas for missile testings. No foreigners, nor even nonresident Russians, were allowed anywhere near the peninsula.

In August 2005 Kamchatka made newspapers worldwide when a training submarine which had become entangled in fishing line had to be rescued by a US and British team, just a few hours before the sub's air supply was up.

## Getting Around

Locals are fond of repeating that on Kamchatka 'there are no roads, only directions.' You will have a hard time getting 'out there,' where the bulk of Kamchatka's glory is (volcano bases, rivers, geysers), without an arranged 6WD truck or helicopter (or several-day hike). Daily buses do go between Petropavlovsk and Paratunka, as well as north via Milkovo to Esso.

Used by vulcanologists and travellers alike, Mi-2 (capacity: six or eight people) and Mi-8 (capacity: 20 people) helicopters charge by time travelled in the air (usually about R40,000 per hour, plus a set pilot fee). An hour or so in the air (return) costs around



### GOING ALONE OR ON A TOUR?

The biggest question for Kamchatka-bound travellers is whether trips can be arranged locally for cheaper (or at all) and what agent to go with. To be honest, probably only those in dire need of saving money should not book a tour in advance – and if so, consider saving Kamchatka for when you have the money or things change. If you just show up and expect to jump on a tour, you'll be lucky to sit around expensive Petropavlovsk for only three or four uncertain and unexciting days before finding a spot. You might not get anything.

And you do need a guide. Many locals have died exploring Kamchatka alone, overcome by sulphurous fumes on volcanoes, crashing through thin crusts into boiling pits, or being mauled by a bear. This ain't Disneyworld.

Considering there are over 120 travel agencies in Petropavlovsk and nearby Yelizovo, options certainly abound. Some are well seasoned and highly professional, monitoring climate conditions and running smooth, infinitely rewarding trips. Some are renegade entrepreneurs with some hiking boots and a pal who knows someone who knows someone with a 4WD or 6WD; their goal is 'get the money, then figure it out.' We've heard reports of some experienced travellers being flat-out scared on frightening hikes without proper equipment or instruction. Reportedly, a couple of Czech tourists on a cheap trip were killed on a hike in 2004.

Don't be scared though. Here are a few good agencies (some of which have deals with foreign agencies). Also see p729 for overseas agents that cover Kamchatka.

**Explore Kamchatka** (☎ 41531-26601; www.explorekamchatka.com; ul Bolshokova 41, Yelizovo) Run by an American living here, Explore hosts several interesting tours and is looking for ways to avoid costly (and polluting) helicopter rides. Their free annual visitors guide provides a useful overview of Kamchatka.

**Kamchatintour** (Map p646; ☎ 41522-7134, 73776; inform@kamchatintour.ru; ul Leningradskaya 124B) Another long-running, reliable agency. Often works with Japanese tour groups, but offers many shorter tours from mid-July to August that individuals can piece together for a full trip fairly easily. Many guides are 20-something youngsters.

**Lost World** (Map p646; ☎ /fax 4152-198 328; www.travelkamchatka.com; 4/1-4 Frolova ul) A highly professional operation with lots of experience. It specialises in smaller group tours with very experienced guides (some are vulcanologists who have lived in the mountains over harsh winters) and tents to sleep in. Many good itineraries, including winter dog-sled tours out of Esso to meet the reindeer-herders, and major treks through central and southern Kamchatka. Sometimes can help independent travellers hook up with groups.

If you do go on your own, the following contacts may help you join other tours or flights:

**Hotel Petropavlovsk Travel Agency** (Map p646; ☎ 41522-91400; travel@petropavlovsk-hotel.ru; ul Marksa 31, Petropavlovsk; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) Mostly sets up independent travellers on weekend bay cruises or rafting trips on weekends only.

**Kamchatka Regional Parks Dept** (Map p646; ☎ 41522-90723; www.park.kamchatka.ru; ul Karl Marksa 29/1, room 305) Independent travellers can sometimes hop on scientist rides to take day trips to various volcanoes – for US\$200 or so return. Also offers full tours.

**Vision of Kamchatka** (Map p646; ☎ 41522-57785; www.kamchatka.org.ru; ul Pobedy 29-58, Petropavlovsk)

Those insistent on going without a travel agent can easily visit Paratunka's hot springs, or arrange their own rafting or horseback adventures from Esso. Volcano climbs will be tougher, though Avachinskaya is near Petropavlovsk.

US\$200 per person in a group of eight or ten. Rides can be exciting (and loud) with windows you can open and room to roam about. Some travellers have complained that some trips adhere to strictly predetermined times at stops, but we had no problems.

The tour agencies listed in boxed text, above, can help arrange both helicopters and suitable road transport.

**PETROPAVLOVSK-KAMCHATSKY**  
**ПЕТРОПАВЛОВСК-КАМЧАТСКИЙ**  
 ☎ 41522 for 5-digit Nos, 4152 for 6-digit Nos  
 pop 255,000 / ☎ Moscow + 9hr

Some see Petropavlovsk as a necessary evil, a hub to Russia's most beautiful scenery, others focus on the setting, one of the world's most beautiful – facing Avacha Bay and looking out at two giant volcanoes

(when the fog behaves) and a long line of snow-capped mountains. Though it's one of Russia's oldest towns in the Far East, Petropavlovsk's 25km-long bay is filled with mostly grim Soviet block housing, but there are enough attractions to warrant a day (maybe two), and people are quite nice.

### History

Petropavlovsk was founded in 1741 by Vitus Bering, the Danish-born Russian captain who discovered the straits that bear his name. The slowly developing town was named for Bering's two ships, the *Svyatoy Pyotr* (St Peter) and *Svyatoy Pavel* (St Paul); 'Kamchatsky' was added to distinguish it from all the other Petropavlovsk. It became the tsars' major Pacific sea port and was used as the base for explorations that turned up the Aleutian Islands and Alaska.

There were some unlikely visitors in 1779, when Captain Clerke, sailing under the British flag, entered the Petropavlovsk harbour in command of Captain James Cook's former ships (Cook had lost them, and his life, two years before in Hawaii). Clerke intended to travel the Arctic, but shortly after setting out was stricken with consumption and died. In August 1854 more British (with the French in tow) sailed into Avacha Bay with more permanent goals in mind. This seaborne Crimean War invasion was successfully and unexpectedly repulsed by the small Petropavlovsk garrison.

During the Soviet era the town became a sizable Pacific Fleet submarine base, but its present prosperity is owed completely to the fishing industry. Rusting Petropavlovsk trawlers bring in a million tonnes of fish a year, of which nearly half is sold to Japan.

### Orientation

Petropavlovsk is strung along one main axis, the road that runs in from the airport 30km west. It enters the city limits as pr Pobedy and, for the hell of it, changes its name 11 times as it snakes around the rippling contours of the bayside hills. Although nominally pl Lenina is the 'historic centre' (quotes intended), there is no one focal point of Petro action.

### Information

Make sure to get registered on your first night. Some travellers have been fined about US\$150 when leaving Kamchatka for not doing so.

### BOOKSHOPS

A couple of good places to pick up maps and postcards:

**Detskaya Kniga** (pr 50 let Oktyabrya 7; ☎ 11am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat)

**Rossiyskaya Kniga** (pr 50 let Oktyabrya; ☎ 11am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat)

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Tet-A-Tet** (☎ 267 540; ul Lukashevskogo 4; per hr R60; ☎ 24hr) Several computers, and Twix bars, coffee and vodka for sale.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Hospital** (☎ 128 610; ul Leningradskaya 114)

### MONEY

**Planeta shopping centre** (ul Lukashevskogo 5) 24-hour ATM offering dollars and rubles.

**Sberbank** (ul Lukashevskogo 2; ☎ 9am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat, 10am-3.30pm Sun) Currency exchange window.

### POST & TELEPHONE

**Main post office** (ul Leninskaya 56; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm) A telephone centre is across the street.

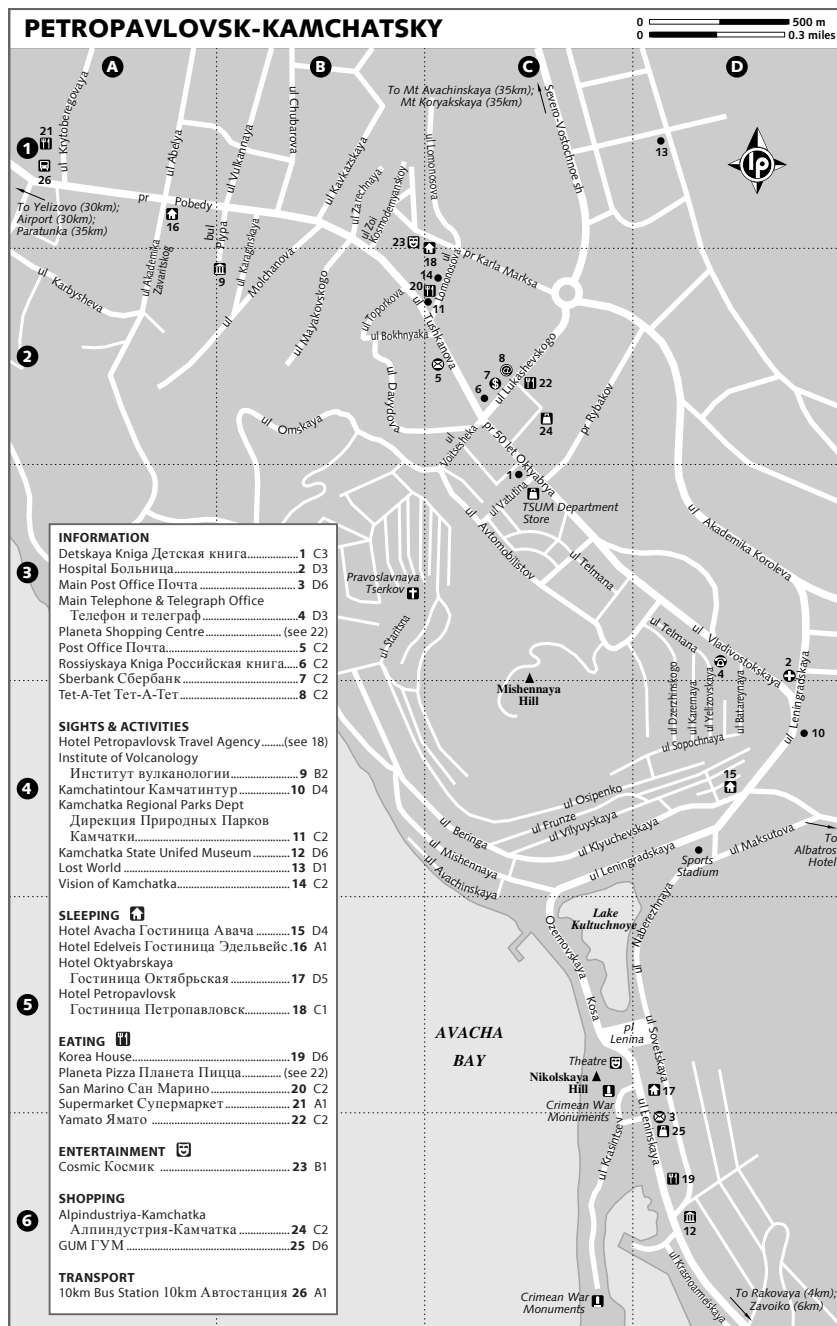
**Main telephone & telegraph office** (ul Vladivostokskaya 5)

**Post office** (ul Tushkanova 9; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun)

### Sights & Activities

Most package tours include a well worthwhile boat tour of Avacha Bay, surely one of the most beautiful harbours in the world with fascinating rock formations all around it. Best are full-day tours that reach Starichkov Island, a haven for bird life. Contact travel agencies (opposite) to see if you can hop on a group tour – it's about US\$55 per person, including lunch; US\$600 for the whole boat.

An excellent way to begin a volcano-centric trip is taking in an expert's lecture at the one-room exhibit in the **Institute of Volcanology** (☎ 59546; bul Piypa 9; admission per group R500; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri). You'll need to prearrange an interpreter (about R500 to R1000 per group) with a travel agency.



The **Kamchatka State Unified Museum** (☎ 125 411; ul Leninskaya 20; admission R150; ☹ 10am-5pm Wed-Sun) is housed in an attractive half-timbered building overlooking the bay. The museum features an imaginative mix of relics and murals that outline Kamchatka's history, for example dioramas of nomadic herders, old cannon balls and flags, photos of the 1975 Tolbachik eruption, maps showing Alaskan expansion). Note that the sign that reads 'free on first Sunday of the month' (in English) does *not* apply to foreigners.

The most walkable part of Petropavlovsk is around the 'historic centre', particularly up from pl Lenina at bayside **Nikolskaya Hill**, where there's a small chapel and several **monuments** to those who fell in the failed Crimean War invasion in 1854. Some buses (including 1 and 22) continue south of town along the hillside road to Rakovaya village, with even better bay views. Just south is Zavoiko (reached by taxi or by foot), where there's a **black-sand beach**, one of the area's nicest, and a good spot from which to spot puffins and other sea birds.

## Sleeping

Conditions at Petro's hotels are all about the same – pretty good and overpriced. All have friendly staff, and Soviet-era rooms with TV, refrigerator, private bathroom with hot water, and free breakfast.

Travel agencies such as Lost World (see p644) arrange good-value homestays with *all* meals for US\$30 per person. Check for flat rentals in local (Russian) papers for about R700 or R800 per night.

**Hotel Petropavlovsk** (☎ 50374; www.petropavlovsk-hotel.ru; pr Karla Marksa 31a; r per person R1600; ☹) This cubey block of a building is where most tour groups go to stay, and it definitely has the best overall rooms; some of the 21 face the volcanoes. Travel agency on hand.

**Hotel Edelveis** (☎ 53324; hotel@idelveis.ru; pr Pobedy 27; s/d R2220/2960) Street-cred from outside (wrecked cars in dreary 'hood), rather grandmotherly inside, with comfy rooms and great staff.

**Hotel Avacha** (☎/fax 11008; www.avacha-hotel.ru; ul Leningradskaya 61; s/d R2400/3300) The most central location of the four hotels, with inland views. Rooms are a bit small, but

bathrooms are quite nice. There's a sauna, air ticket agency and (formal) casino.

**Hotel Oktyabrskaya** (☎ 112 684; hotelok2@mail.kamchatka.ru; ul Sovetskaya 51; s/d US\$85/108) Best location, with easy access for bay strolls amidst the 'historic centre.' Staff sometimes, enigmatically, won't allow visitors to stay here – even when empty.

**Albatros Hotel** (☎ 76806; express-k@mail.kamchatka.ru; ul Kutuzova 18; r from R1700) Further from the centre.

## Eating

All the hotels have cafés. In summer, beer and shashlyk stands set up along the small beach, near pl Lenina.

**Yamato** (☎ 267 700; Planeta shopping centre, ul Lukashevskogo 5; meals R250-350; ☹ noon-midnight Sun-Thu, to 3am Fri & Sat) Past the shopping centre's video games, Yamato serves surprisingly tasty sushi amidst soothing Japanese-style screens – to the tune of dance music. Set lunches (R100 to R150) are a steal.

**Planeta Pizza** (☎ 230 368; Planeta shopping centre; meals R250-350; ☹ 9am-midnight) Next to Yamato, Planeta's tables get filled with locals following good pizzas (from R120) with milkshakes.

**San Marino** (☎ 93355; ul Karl Marksa 29/1; meals R700-1000; ☹ noon-1am) Colourful, stylish restaurant on the backside of a grim office building has a full nautical theme in décor (only half the menu is fish). It's quite good and draws locals who park their new Japanese import SUVs outside.

**Korea House** (☎ 121 193; ul Leninskaya 26; meals R700-1000; ☹ 11am-4pm & 5pm-1am) Classy Korean food in bay-view historic building.

**Supermarket** (☹ 9am-9pm) Behind the 10km bus station you'll find Petropavlovsk's best supermarket.

## Entertainment

**Cosmic** (☎ 94990; ☹ bowling 1pm-6am Mon-Fri, noon-6am Sat & Sun, ☹ disco 10pm-6am) Next to the Hotel Petropavlovsk, 1st-floor lanes cost R360 to R780 per hour (cheapest in afternoon) – also air hockey and booze in the house; basement disco charges R50 to R150 cover.

## Shopping

**Alpindustria-Kamchatka** (☎ 230 246; malkov@mail.iks.ru; pr 50 let Oktyabrya 22; ☹ 11am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat, to 5pm Sun) This valuable camping-gear shop has about all you'll need for overnight volcano treks. You can also rent stuff –

backpacks are R30 per day, sleeping bags R40, tents R150.

**GUM** (ul Leninskaya 54; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat) Clothes and souvenirs.

### Getting There & Away

There are flights to/from Irkutsk (R12,721, four hours, weekly), Khabarovsk (R6000, 2½ hours, daily), Moscow (R12,000, nine hours, daily), St Petersburg (R12,400, 10 hours, four weekly) and Vladivostok (R8400, three hours, six weekly). Also, a weekly flight on Magadan Air comes from Anchorage, Alaska (US\$1400 return, four hours) stopping en route to Magadan (R3000, 1½ hours).

From the 10km bus station you can catch daily buses to Paratunka, Yelizovo, Milkovo, Esso and a few other destinations. See those sections for details.

### Getting Around

Buses (R10) run from the 10km bus station (*avtostantsiya desyaty kilometr*), on pr Pobedy at the northern end of town, to the Regional Museum. *Marshrutky* (R15) provide most of the rest of the town's transportation.

All buses and *marshrutky* for the airport (R20, 45 minutes) depart from the 10km station; take anything marked 'Aeroport' or 'Yelizovo', which is the name of the settlement close by the airport. To get into town from the airport, catch any bus at the Petropavlovsk stop across from the airport

entrance. A taxi costs R300 or R400. A taxi around town is R60 to R150.

### AROUND PETROPAVLOVSK-KAMCHATSKY Yelizovo ЕЛИЗОВО

The 'airport town' – a junction town some 30 kilometres west of Petropavlovsk – is actually a nicer town with shaded promenades, proximity to the helipad, and the three-room **Yelizovo B&B** (☎ 41531-26601; www.explorekamchatka.com; 41 Bolshakova ul; r per person incl breakfast US\$40), run by an American woman who operates Explore Kamchatka. All 'Yelizovo' buses from Petropavlovsk stop at the airport to/from Yelizovo.

### Paratunka Паратунка

Sprawled-out Paratunka (25km south of Yelizovo) is a leafy network of spa resorts set up around natural or pool-like hot springs. Most tours fit in a day here. Many are geared more to Russian locals or tourists, but it's a possible back-up base. One of a couple of dozen, **Golubaya Laguna** (Blue Lagoon; ☎ 4152-124 718; www.bluelagoon.ru; r with/without private bathroom from R2700/1530) is surrounded by woods, with a couple popular pools (slides, Jacuzzi) and near more natural hot-spring pools. If you have private transport and a local guide, the natural springs on the slopes of **Goryachaya**, 15km further south, are better.

Several *marshrutky* (R20) plus bus 111 connect Paratunka with Yelizovo and Petropavlovsk.

### Mt Avachinskaya & Mt Koryakskaya

Горы Авачинская и Корякская  
The nearest volcanoes to Petropavlovsk are these two giants looming 20km north of town (about 35km by road). The smaller one on the east, Mt Avachinskaya (2741m) is generally included on tours and is one of Kamchatka's 'easier' volcanoes to summit (about six to eight hours up). Avachinskaya last erupted in 1991, but you can see it smoking daily.

More forbidding Mt Koryakskaya (3456m) takes experienced climbers about 12 hours to climb up.

Unfortunately there's no public transportation here – getting there on your own can be shockingly expensive (about US\$160 for a return van with 'guide' and

### ACTIVITIES

#### Rafting

From Petropavlovsk, the **Bystraya River** is the easiest to get to and easiest trip to arrange; the most-travelled section is the 120km southwest-flowing stretch between the village of Malki, 80km west of Yelizovo, and the Ust-Bolsheretsk bridge just before the Bystraya empties into the Sea of Okhotsk. The name means 'fast', but there are only a few rapids; the journey takes a leisurely two days. A two-night trip (with guides, transport, meals, tents) arranged locally costs about US\$250 per person.

Guesthouses in Esso can arrange trips to lovely, more rapid stretches of the Bystraya from about R2000 per person per day.

#### Horseback Riding

Near Petropavlovsk, you can ride on day and overnight trips, starting at R500 per hour. One agency, **Kamchatka Tour** (☎ 166 128; ul 3a Kosmichevsky proezd 201, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky; www.kamchatka-tour.com, in Russian; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat), sets off on one-day/two-day trips from its ranch about 20km from the centre for R1000/3500 per person (most commonly on Saturday and Sunday).

Guesthouses in more-remote Esso arrange trips – with some more appealing overnighter options to surrounding lakes – from about R600 to R800 per person.

#### Skiing

Agents like Lost World (p644) arrange heli-skiing and snowboarding trips, with daily rides up volcanoes. But it'll cost you. A 10-day tour (not including lunch and dinner) costs about €3650 per person.

#### Fishing

Kamchatka is home to a quarter of the world's salmon. Proceeds from fishing trips with nonprofit **Wild Salmon Rivers** (☎ 425-742-1938; www.steelhead.org; 16300 Mill Creek Blvd Ste 115B, Mill Creek, Washington, USA) help study and protect local fish populations. Weeklong trips run about US\$5000.

You can get more information online from the US-based **Wild Salmon Center** (www.wildsalmoncenter.org), which works to protect salmon on both sides of the Pacific.

interpreter). Try hitching. The volcanoes are great, but the base camp is rather bustling – in comparison to the remoteness of other volcanoes – with Petro views, and a complex of cabins that see much traffic in summer from locals and tour groups.

It's possible to hike 40km from here to **Nalychevo National Park** in two days.

### SOUTHERN KAMCHATKA

#### Mt Mutnovskaya Гора Мутновская

Kamchatka vulcanologists love all their 'kids' – the many steaming, cratered, lonely, tall, squat volcanoes – but more than a couple of crusty vets told us Mutnovskaya (2322m) is probably the best – for studying, climbing or looking at. Hiking up takes three or four hours depending on where you start, though it can be snowy even in mid-July. It's considered one of the easier climbs, though when weather turns against

you, it can quickly become gruelling. The effort is worth it; its bubbling, steaming caldera feels like another planet, and for the really fearless it's possible to go to the very crumbly edge of the beast. No wonder engineers are working on tapping the volcano's thermal power to generate electricity for Kamchatka.

Many tours climb the oval-shaped caldera of nearby **Gorely** (1829m). Base camps here are tent only and far more remote than Avachinskaya.

It's possible to go snowboarding from June to August in **Rodnikovoe**, about 15km north of Mt Mutnovskaya in the Vilyucha River valley.

#### Lake Kurilskoe Озеро Курильское

Reached by helicopter towards the southern tip of the peninsula, Lake Kurilskoe (part of the mountainous Yuzhno-Kamchatsky

### AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Well worth making time for is a meal at Paratunka's surprisingly genuine **Exotic Picnic with a Farmer** (choom@pochta.ru; about US\$25-35 per person), set up by tour agencies; one-time Muscovite Sasha offers very lively sing-song meals with vodka toasts and smoked fish plus loads of veggie dishes pulled from wild plants near his lakeside home (near Golubaya Laguna). Meals are in an all-wooden building or teepee (bring repellent). At last pass, a young college student (also 'Sasha') added her honey-dewed, heart-melting voice to Big Sasha's gruffer backups. Lots to take in: sailor songs, great food and quality entertainment in rustic Russian setting.



State Reserve) is Kamchatka's most famed spot to view wildlife, chiefly in August when brown bears come in droves to feast on over a million salmon en route to spawn in nearby streams. Soaring above are many Steller's sea eagles. It's beautiful too, dotted with an island and rimmed by volcanoes.

Don't wander alone. In 2000 a Japanese photographer was eaten by a bear here.

Some bigger trips take in the lake. Some agents, such as Explore Kamchatka (p644), offer a six-day trip here including guide, meals, basic cabin accommodation and transport for about US\$1600.

## NORTHERN KAMCHATKA

Milkovo and Esso are easily reached by public transport – much of the rest of the north requires a helicopter, 4WD or 6WD.

### Valley of the Geysers & Uzon Caldera

#### Долина Гейзеров

About 200km north of Petropavlovsk and most commonly accessed by helicopter is the spectacular Valley of the Geysers (Dolina Geyzerov). Discovered in 1941, the 6km-long valley cut through by the Geysernaya River is part of the protected Kronotsky State Biospheric Reserve. Here, around 200 geothermal pressure valves sporadically blast steam, mud and water heavenwards. The setting is exquisite and walking tours along a boardwalk take you past some of the more colourful and active geysers. The valley is closed for a 40-day period between May and June because of migrating birds.

There's a bit of heist in price. **Krechet** (☎ 41531-24347; www.krechet.com; ul lzuchina 4, Yelizovo) runs the helicopter market and, in 2004, doubled prices from about US\$250 per person to US\$500 for a day-trip tour (about four or five hours travel time). Many visitors feel it's simply too much for what you get.

If you splurge, be sure to go for a trip that adds a stop at Uzon Caldera (about US\$50 more), the remains of an ancient volcano, now a 10km crater with steamy lakes.

### Milkovo Милково

☎ 41533 / pop 13,000 / ☎ Moscow +9hr

Some 300km north of Petropavlovsk, close to the Kamchatka River, is the down-at-

heel fishing and agricultural town of Milkovo, where you'll find a surprisingly interesting **museum** (admission R140; ☎ 11am-1pm & 2-6pm Wed-Sun), with a collection of native artefacts, shamans' hats, and pictures depicting the traditional lives of the area's Itelmeni people. The cross-shaped, Siberian-style building was designed by local artist Mikhail Ugrin, who made many of the wall paintings around town. Also in town is a replica of a Cossack *ostrog* (fort).

The **Hantai Travel Company** (☎ 22937; www.iks.ru/~balanev/index2.htm; ul Pobedi 6/37) offers a few trips to places not often visited by other groups.

The **Hotel Dolina** (☎ 22892; s/d R800/1400), on the main square (two blocks from the bus stop), is an OK hotel on the top floor of a Soviet-style building.

There's a café beside the bus stop; there are four buses daily from Petropavlovsk (R240, four hours). At research time, buses left Petropavlovsk at noon, 5pm and 6pm. Call ☎ 52202 in Petropavlovsk for more information.

### Esso Эссо

☎ 41542 / pop 3000 / ☎ Moscow +9hr

Easily reached by public bus, the snug-in-valley village of Esso is a quiet, lovely place with the scent of pine and friendly locals who live in picturesque wooden cottages (many of which let rooms cheaply). Locals like to call it the 'Switzerland of Kamchatka'; locals also go rather un-Swiss in heating their greenhouses for year-round tomatoes – tapping into the abundant hot springs. It's easy to arrange rafting or horseback trips here for less than in Petropavlovsk.

Evenki people migrated here 150 years ago from what is now the Sakha Republic, becoming the distinct Even people in the process. Here they met the local Itelmeni and Korayak people as well as Russians. Although Esso remains a mixed community, the nearby village of Anavgay is 100% Even.

There's no ATM in town. The library has a very iffy Internet connection.

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

You can find out much about the history of the area's peoples in the local **museum**

### DANCERS OF ESSO

One of the best reasons to make the long trip to Esso is the chance to see the folk dance group Nulgur (meaning 'strangers' or 'travellers'). Established in 1985, the group plays a couple of hundred shows around Kamchatka and Russia annually – check with a Petropavlovsk agent to arrange a 60-minute show. The 18-member troupe performs traditional dances and songs from native people around Kamchatka – the director casually explains some of the moves between numbers.

It's touristy, but no tourist trap. The troupe constantly searches out traditions, costumes and songs to stage – and so is instrumental in keeping some alive.

Some throat chants replicate the sounds of reindeer, while Even shoulder-movements replicate riding a reindeer. One highlight is the young master Mikhail, who joined the group in 1999 at just three years old.

The hour-long shows are held in the ugly cultural building in town. You may be able to join another group for about US\$25.

(☎ 21319; admission with/without guide R80/50; ☎ 10am-6pm), a small but nicely designed wooden building set beside the burbling river that flows through Esso. Here also is a picturesque wooden bridge and a **souvenir shop** (admission R5) selling local handicrafts. The museum guides really care about what they do – one bragged about putting an 'old Englishman' to sleep after a four-and-a-half hour tour! Warning: a visit usually includes a dance lesson. Trying to sit it out is futile.

Other than checking out the outdoor **hot springs pool** and hopefully seeing the dance group Nulgur (above), the main reason for coming here is to fly in a helicopter and track down one of the three Even-managed **reindeer herds**. A flight into a small nomadic camp, where you should be able to watch the Even round up (and sometimes slaughter) at least one of their 1500-strong herd of snorting reindeer is certainly an unforgettable experience. The high alpine scenery, carpeted with wild flowers (and alive with mosquitoes) in summer is probably worth the flight alone. Costs are based on how long it takes to reach the camp (at R40,000 per hour), plus a US\$300 excursion fee. Make sure the 'fee' actually gets to the nomads (for example, you can prepay the fee by taking a predetermined value of groceries on board with you). You stay three hours maximum. You may be able to arrange this via a guesthouse in town (do so a day or two in advance). Call ☎ 41542-21345 for information.

Flights out to **Kozyrevsk**, the base camp from which to launch an ascent of the re-

gion's giant volcano **Klyuchevskaya** (4688m), must be arranged through an agency.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Many Kamchatka residents treat Esso as a holiday base, and there are several small, simple hotels and private rooms to let. All arrange meals.

**Alyona Tur** (☎ 21271; altour@mail.kamchatka.ru; s/d R450/900; 🍴) A small complex with shared bathrooms (and often partying Koreans). There's a small hot-springs pool in the back.

**Hotel Altai** (☎ 41542-21218; ul Mostovaya 12A; r per person with/without bathroom R500/300; 🍴) Less touristy, this hotel has small rooms in a ginger breadlike house. They can help you get in a raft or on a horse.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

A daily bus runs here from the 10km station in Petropavlovsk (R520); at research time it left at 9am, taking nine to 12 hours depending on the condition of the largely unsealed road.

For the return trip, buy tickets ahead of time in Esso at the plank-wood **ticket office** (☎ 21399; ul Mostovaya 9), which doubles as the station.

### Tolbachik Толбачик

Passing dense forest and a river ferry, about six hours to the east of Esso by 6WD, Tolbachik features the site of interconnected volcanoes and a wild mix of terrain. The main volcano to climb is Plosky Tolbachik, a flat-top, often snow-splattered volcano that erupted in 1941, creating a 3km crater. You can reach the crater by

taking a six-hour hike up the volcano. To the south are three black volcano craters created from flat ground in 1975. Chunks of volcanic rock line the road, atop are sulphuric craters, and just past this is a dead forest with the bare tops of birch sticking

up from a sea of hardened lava. The area is so moonlike, the Soviet space programme tested its 'moonwalker' vehicle here before sending it out into space.

Groups sometimes include Tolbachik on tours.