











Siberian Tiger Winter Tour

Destination: Russia **Duration:** 14 Days **Dates:** 20th Feb – 5th Mar 2017

-  Spotting and watching a female Tiger around 10m into the forest for 2-3 minutes
-  Having the expert guidance of Alexander, a leading Russian tiger expert
-  Watching a female Tiger walking down the road ahead of us in the falling snow
-  Camera trapping rareties like as Siberian Weasel, Eurasian Lynx and even a Wolf
-  Following a male Tiger's tracks & scrapes on our first evening in the forest
-  Exploring the immense Taiga forest that spans 2/3 of the northern hemisphere
-  Collecting camera traps with stunning Tiger footage including mother & cub videos
-  Learning about the indigenous Udeghe people from one of their elders in Gvasyugi
-  Tracking a Tiger kill and having another Tiger run from the kill as we approached!
-  Meeting Zhorik the injured but playful Tiger; rescued from a circus & living in Utyos

Tour Leader / Guides

Martin Royle (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)
 Alexander (Forest Reserve Director & Guide)
 Sergey (Base Camp Cook)
 Nikolai (Vehicle / Snow Mobile Driver)
 Sergey (Snow Mobile Driver)
 Alexander (Transfer Vehicle Driver)
 Ivan (Base Camp Assistant & Fire Manager)
 Igor & Valeri (Base Camp Assistants)
 Viktor (Russian – English Translator)
 Eduard & Yana (Uytos Rehabilitation Centre Manager)

Participants

Mr. Mark Coreth Mrs. Sophie Fernandes
 Mr. Phillip Darroch Mr. Kathy Misunas
 Ms. Susan Teece Ms. Sarah Westphal

Overview

Day 1: Khabarovsk

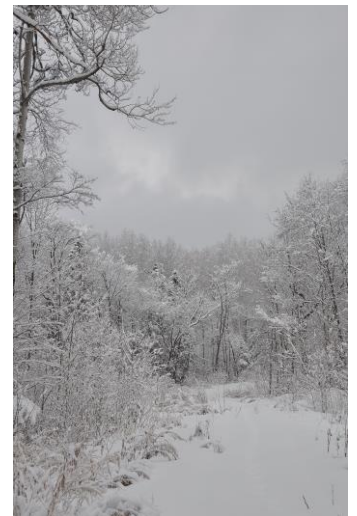
Days 2-12: Forest Reserve

Day 5: Utyos Centre

Day 7: Udeghe Village

Day 13: Khabarovsk

Day 14: Home





Day by Day Breakdown

Overview

Tigers are most commonly associated with the tropical and subtropical forests and elephant grasslands of the Indian Subcontinent and South East Asia; however they used to range far and wide over the Asian continent. From Iran to Korea and Indonesia to Kazakhstan including most of Far Eastern and Central Russia; unfortunately over 93% of their historical range has been lost since the start of the 1900's (incredibly a reduction of 40% since 1990!). Most of the comprehensive decimation of the tiger's range has occurred in China where the tiger has a paradoxical role in the culture; both a revered and celebrated species; an animal integral to the creationist myths of Chinese religion and also one of the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac. However this reverence is countered by a merciless hunger for tiger products; every part of the tiger is utilised by the Chinese in their traditional medicinal practises. From penis (for fertility) to whiskers (for asthma) and every part of the body in between the demand for tiger products is so lucrative that they have been hunted to the verge of extinction in China and now the demand has been met by poachers in other countries. The vast reduction of the tiger's numbers in China has led to a huge gap in the tiger's current distribution. Whilst still present in areas of South and South East Asia any map of the tiger's range will include a small shaded area along the Russian coastline just north west of Japan. This is the realm of the Siberian tiger (more correctly called either the Amur tiger or Ussuri tiger and in the local Udeghe language Amba); a forest that is covered in a blanket of snow and ice for 6 months of the year and then a rich and diverse temperate boreal 'jungle' in the summer. At first glance in the winter this seems like the last place that a tiger would be found, however they have spent a considerable amount of their evolutionary history in the forests of eastern and central Asia. The evolutionary history of the tiger starts in China around 2 million years ago and the tiger quickly moved north and reached the Russian Far East, Japan and Korea around 1.5 million years ago. They remained here for some time, spreading west and as far as Turkey (for some reason tigers never made it further west and into Europe and they didn't cross the land bridge connecting Asia with the Americas); whilst some walked the land bridges connecting Sumatra, Java and Bali to SE Asia at the same time as many migrated northwards. The tiger has is and always has been a truly Asian species, born and bred in this vast continent.

It is ironic that the most closely associated country with the tiger (India) is the one that they arrived in the latest. Tigers only made it to India round 12,000 years ago, this is known because fossil evidence suggests that they never made it to Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka was attached to India via a land bridge until around 12,000 years ago. Since evidence of tigers has been found throughout India from around then it is clear that they would have made it to Sri Lanka if they had arrived when they were still connected. As tigers have spent most of their history in cooler climates they are more at home in the temperate forests than the sub-tropical ones of India, a fact that is highlighted by their dislike of the heat and their love of bathing in the heat of the dry season. So despite the Russian winter seeming so alien for a tiger to call home, they are very at home here and arguable more so than in India.

So it is here, in the frozen forests of Far Eastern Russia where our search for one of the most elusive and endangered animals in the world would take place. Whilst seeing a wild Siberian tiger is extremely difficult we would be helped in this task by Alexander and his team who run the 20,000 hectare reserve around 200km south of Khabarovsk. This reserve and the surrounding forests are home to a very high density of tigers (a density so high that it rivals densities in some of India and Nepal's most productive national parks); one of the main reasons for this high density of tigers is the prey base. Even though finding any wildlife in these forests in winter is tough there are lots of deer and wild boar around and whilst hunting occurs here (during hunting seasons) it has been less so than in other areas and so the numbers of prey still remains high. Our time in the reserve would coincide with one of the two annual censuses that are conducted in the reserve the numbers recorded here are vital in the ambitious yet achievable target to double the wild tiger numbers throughout their range by 2022); by counting the tracks and also by collecting pictures and videos of the tigers from remote camera traps the team are able to build a picture of the current population. The presence of adult male and females using the same areas are great and a litter of cubs is the perfect reward for many hours of tracing tracks in the freezing conditions. By spending time with the team in the reserve and becoming part of the tiger's continued fight for survival here you will be given a unique view into tiger conservation in a part of the world that is seeing genuine tiger conservation success. Most of the tiger populations around the world are decreasing, plagued with poaching and surrounded by huge and growing populations the tiger's days seem numbered in many countries they exist in. But in Russia the numbers are increasing, from around 40 in the 1940's to 450 or so today (320-350 adults with the rest being cubs and sub-adults). This is in part due to increased conservation since the 1950's when the first ever census of tigers (anywhere in the world) was conducted and the government realised the peril that the tiger was in, part the fact that Vladimir Putin loves tigers and has set up numerous new parks and reserves and has implemented new patrols and anti-poaching measures and also part that Russia is so vast and the population so low, that there are still places where wildlife can live in complete ignorance of people. As the wonderful and passionate Russian tiger specialist Dale Miquelle says 'Nowhere else do so many tigers live around so few people'. All of these factors contribute to an increasing number of tigers and with lots of forest habitat around there is scope for a vastly larger population here. But most of this incredible work is only possible with the help of people like us, the eco-tourist and that is what sets Alexander alone, his ideology



that eco-tourism here will provide enough income to support conservation and research and will also provide alternative income to the hunter that are currently the only people who pay the reserves for their use. So we would try and see if we could find a Siberian tiger, however this tour is about contributing to their continued survival and also to understand a very different tiger to the one that is usually covered in documentaries and books. To see huge tiger tracks in deep virgin snow is an incredible experience and one that will live long in the memory even if we are not lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the incredible and hardy animal that inhabits these frozen forests.



Day 1 **Khabarovsk / Forest Reserve**

Arrival

This morning Viktor and Olga met Mark, Sophie, Sue, Kathy and Sarah at the hotel in Khabarovsk after breakfast and took them the short distance to Alexander's apartment where we met Alexander. Having arrived in the few days leading up to the trip they waited at Alexander's for the arrival of Martin and the final client Phil. Olga went to collect them from the airport as they arrived and we all met up at Alexander's. From here we loaded up the three vehicles (to be driven by Alexander, Nikolai and another Alexander) and visited the nearby supermarket for any alcohol and snacks we would like to take with us. For the journey we split, with Nikolai taking Sue, Kathy and Sarah, Alexander taking Martin, Phil and Viktor and Alexander in his old Soviet era truck taking Mark, Sophie and Nikolai's dog Leera to the reserve, we would all meet up along the way and then for dinner at the base camp.

Today was not too cold (only -17C) in Khabarovsk, but the city had been remarkably warm for the preceding days and we expected the forest to be significantly colder. We were also glad of some recent snowfall in the forest, with 2 snowfalls of around 30cm each in the last couple of weeks; meaning that the tracking would be good in the forest.

Along the way we didn't see very much, of course some of the hardy winter birds were seen from the road, including a huge mixed flock of large-billed crows and carrion crows which roost along a section of road a few kilometres out of the suburbs of Khabarovsk. This is a commonly used roosting site and the 100 plus strong flock (or murder (the collective noun for crows)) looked imposing as they perched in the leafless almost lifeless trees either side of the icy road. The skies were wonderfully clear and brilliantly blue all day today and as we entered the nearby village we stopped to pick up Alexander's son and cook Sergei and one of the reserves staff members Ivan and then carried on into the forest. On the approach to the reserve from the village we passed the barren snow covered flat marshes and silver birch forests which marked the start of the taiga forest and the reserve. Whilst Nikolai's vehicle had a couple of Ural owl sightings the other vehicles were contented with our first tiger tracks. It wasn't long into the forest before we found the large prints of a male tiger walking along the road towards the base camp. He was carefully treading in the tyre tracks of a previous vehicle, this is the easiest way of walking in the snow as the vehicle has compacted the snow and made it easier to walk on. For around 10km the male (known to Alexander as Achkarik (a name meaning the 'glasses wearer' or 'geek' due to a stripe pattern on his tail that looks like a pair of spectacles). We knew this because of a combination of factors, firstly the size of the prints was an indication of the tiger's identity, but when we arrived at a large wooden bridge over a frozen river we saw the tracks went straight over. This is a tell tale sign of the tiger being Achkarik as he is the only tiger that uses the bridge (the others opting to walk over the frozen river instead of the manmade contraption. The final clue to his identity being the route he took, disappearing off the road into the forest down a smaller road (not driveable in the winter) and then meeting up with the main road again further down. This is a shortcut and a territorial route used regularly by Achkarik. Along the way we saw where he had scraped and scent marked, these behaviours are very common in patrolling adult tigers and we would learn more about these behaviours in the coming days.

We arrived at the base camp full of thoughts of the tigers being close at hand and as we had dinner which Igor had prepared for us, we discussed various topics about the forest, tigers and Alexander. The meals here are a great selection of locally foraged and produced food. The vast majority of the food we consume in the reserve comes from the surrounding forest, during the hunting season the wild boar, Siberian roe deer and wapiti are harvested and then stored in the natural deep freeze, the trout and salmon are all locally caught, all of the fruit and jams are collected from the forest as is the wonderful wild garlic condiment that is so typical of the Russian Far East.

The base camp would be staffed by a team of 7 Russians whilst we would be here, Alexander and his son, Nikola and Alexander as drivers and then Ivan, Igor and Valeri who would help in making sure that the base camp operates effectively by keeping the supply of fire wood going, the cabins warm, collecting water from the nearby stream and many other vital tasks to keep the village like base camp operational. As well as our accommodation cabins, the kitchen and dining cabin the base camp has two outdoor toilets, a museum (which Mark was allocated as a studio for his sculpting), a garage and indoor chicken coop, a traditional banya (Russian sauna and integral part of the culture here) which would be available for use every night, various store rooms, dog kennels and work



stations. We would have a full briefing and tour of the base camp tomorrow morning, tonight we retired to our animal themed log cabins for our first night in the icy wilderness of the Russian Far East.

Day 2 Forest Reserve

Tiger Tracking

This morning the temperature was a very brisk -29°C and the skies were brilliantly clear and blue and at 09:00am we met in the camp dining room and had a hearty breakfast prepared by Sergey. The camp's resident Eurasian nuthatches and tiny marsh tits were very active this morning (as they usually are) flying back and forth from the small feeders near the main cabins and their nest holes and also searching in between the recently cut and chopped logs for firewood. These freshly cut logs are home to hibernating insects and beetle grubs which are welcome food for nuthatches.

After breakfast and once we had got our cold weather gear on we were given a guided tour by Alexander around the base camp. Throughout the tour and the following days the enthusiasm for the forest and its wildlife that Alexander has shines through and is not lost in translation. In fact there were many times when he would talk about tigers and the wildlife in the reserve and you would understand everything before Viktor had translated anything!

The camp itself had started life as a geologist's camp but in 1993 Alexander took over the reserve and wanted to do more biological research in the forest. No body knew the tiger population here when he first arrived and the numbers of wild boar and other ungulates were decreasing and the trend for all wildlife around here looked very grim. Since then Alexander has worked wonders in protecting the area and raising awareness and now the tiger numbers as well as the ungulate populations are increasing. One of the things that sets Alexander's base camp apart from other base camps in the forest is his better and larger cabins for tourism as well as a very nice banya. We were shown these cabins, the banya as well as the other buildings that make up the base camp. The idea behind the better and larger cabins being that he could feasibly run a research station here throughout the year and not just have some people here some of the time of the year as other base camps operated. As he showed us around the base camp he explained about the different trees and plants that are found in the forest and many of which he has planted in the base camp so that the camp can make the most of these species. As we were being shown around we were introduced to Alexander's favourite dog; Zidane; he is the father of the current litter of 5 puppies as well as numerous other puppies in the past, and Alexander's pride and joy. The dogs here are kept in cages as a precaution against tiger attacks. Tigers in Russia compete with wolves and they have evolved a seeming dislike for wolves and as a result all things canine. In the wild they would actively kill and try to disperse wolves from the forest (to reduce competition) and this can manifest itself in dog killing, which is not just distressing for the dog owner but can lead to a tiger spending too much time around a settlement where it may one day take a human or itself be killed. In fact many of Alexander's stories about tigers occurred within the perimeter of the base camp, including one where a tiger took one of his puppies from just 5m in front of Alexander as he stood in the entrance to the kitchen.

One of the most fundamental things that shines through at the base camp is that nothing is wasted, cigarette butts are saved and burnt as fuel, ashes from the fires are saved, mixed with salt and left as mineral salt licks for the deer at certain strategic locations in the forest and the tea leaves and tea bags are taken from the kettle and buried, these then attract worms that are used in the summer for fishing. It is very humbling to see people here live in harmony with the forest in a way that is so completely lost in most of Western society.

We were shown the various cabins that are themed to particular animals in the reserve, *izybur* (wapiti), *medved* (bear), *casoula* (roe deer) and *kaban* (wild boar) as well as the banya and how it works, the chicken coop, that provides fresh eggs and the museum that is usually only used in summer as it takes too much fuel to heat up sufficiently in winter (an exception to the rule was made as Mark was allocated the museum as a studio for his sculpting and also to stay in). Alexander showed us the *Schistandra* vine which produces berries that are made into a delicious jam and also which roots are used to make tea with. We were also guided through some of the other plants that have been deliberately planted around the camp as their roots, leaves and berries are very good in a concoction of teas. One thing that is also very noticeable around here is the high presence of mistle-like parasitic plants that grow in clumps in the tree tops. Around one in 5 trees has one of these and Alexander explained that when a bird eats the berries of the mistle their faeces becomes very sticky so that when the bird defecates it sticks to the trunk or branch of a tree (without falling off and to the ground) this allows the seeds that are undigested in the dung then grow directly from faeces at the top of the tree. One of the most amazing plants that we were introduced to is the famous ginseng, the ginseng grows in this forest all over but amazingly only grows a new bud and leaves every 9 years, so it is understandably highly sought after by the local people and one of the two groups of indigenous peoples here (the Nanai) use lots of ginseng in their medicine. We were shown where our water comes from, direct from a frozen over stream at the back of the camp and it is so cold, refreshing and delicious he claims he could bottle it and become very wealthy (however during our stay we would boil the water first – just to be safe). He also explained about the old banya that he wants to convert to be either a small bee farm in the summer or a rescue shelter for orphaned bear cubs to hibernate over winter. Currently a neighbouring reserve is run by a bear scientist and he keeps many orphaned cubs over the first two winters before tagging them and releasing them to fend for themselves once they are sufficiently old enough. Another wonderful aspect of Alexander's knowledge and respect for the forest is born out of his love and compassion for the indigenous people who live in the forest and



always have done. A little Buddha style wood carving has a great place in the base camp, this is Podi the Udeghe people's god of nature and rubbing his belly is good luck.

As the sun shone brightly in the sky we were shown various natural artifacts collected by Alexander and stored in his own cabin. We were also shown the official animal of the reserve, the rather innocuous Eurasian nuthatch (not the tiger or bear that inhabit the forest but this small forest bird), the reason being that Alexander loves the nuthatches never ending work ethic as it is constantly busying itself in search of food.

After this introduction to the base camp and a small insight into the way that the local people use the plants here we headed out to check one of the commonly used tiger patrolling routes. This is around 2 kilometres from the base camp and runs along a small stream (all frozen and under a layer of snow during winter), we would use the snow mobiles and sledges and create the nice compacted pathway that would hopefully encourage the tigers to use it in the coming days.

Throughout the trip Alexander and his team would be guiding us along certain transect routes that they use twice a year to make the tiger censuses and he will be making a note of all animal tracks we see. The rare direct sightings along with track data and camera trap images and videos are all combined to produce an accurate summary of the tiger population in the reserve and surrounding forests and Alexander was also in charge of collecting the similar data kept by other reserve managers (although few – if any) are as dedicated and tiger friendly as Alexander, many use the forest reserves strictly as they were meant to be used which is to sell off certain trees to logging commissions and also selling hunting permits. These are things Alexander does seldom, he never allows logging and only sells a few permits as he does need the money to run his research, however he cuts short the hunting season by 2 weeks and never sells his full allocation of permits. This is one of the main reasons that the tiger numbers are so high in and around his reserve, there is more food (seeds and nuts) for the prey animals and so more food for the tigers (deer and wild boar). They seem to use the protection of his reserve as a nursery and the reserve acts like a heart, pumping out tigers to nearby forests. Here his work includes educating the other forest reserve managers on the importance of having a healthy forest and also the local people that the tiger is an important species and one that should be looked after and not persecuted.

Today we also saw several large 'nests' in the trees either side of the trail and even one in the middle of the camp and very close to Martin's cabin. These nests were made by Asiatic black bears in the summer as they sleep in the trees as well as climb the trees to feed on tender leaves and buds at the top. This is a strange behaviour for the Asiatic black bear and the reason they spend so much time in the trees is the presence of tigers; that are predators of the bears. Obviously during the winter the Asiatic black bears as well as the brown bears that also live here are hibernating, but the reserve in summer and autumn is also the best place in the world to see this endangered bear species.

Other commonly seen tracks crisscrossing the road throughout our stay would be sable, Manchurian elk, wild boar, Siberian roe deer, hazel grouse, Eurasian red squirrel, hare species and various species of shrew and mouse who spent the winter in tunnels under the snow and make quick excursions in the open when crossing the road.

We didn't see any fresh tiger tracks along the stream today, but we did find a nice Eurasian otter trail as it slide and ran its way through snow on top of the frozen stream. We made it quite far into the forest and whilst Ivan and Nikolai blazed a trail further into the forest we stayed with Alexander in the wonderful frozen forest and were introduced to some of the plants here including the arelia plant, sometimes called the devil's plant because of its nasty thorns covering its stem and branches or the Manchurian palm because in summer its large leaves give the impression of a palm tree. They are related to ginseng and also have some medicinal properties. Before we started the journey back to the base camp Alexander also pointed out some other tree species including 3 species of maple and ash. This is secondary forest here and not many of the old hard woods are present in this part of the forest. The journey back was against the backdrop of the setting sun glowing gold and orange off the birch bark and dried leaves still clinging to some of the trees. What a nice little excursion into the forest for our first afternoon, tomorrow we would investigate the tracks we saw yesterday on our drive in and see if we have this tiger caught on the camera traps.





Day 3 Forest Reserve

Tiger Tracking

This morning was a little warmer than yesterday with the temperature at -12°C and the skies overcast and threatening snow. During breakfast Susan told us that she had heard a tiger roaring just off into the forest early this morning behind her cabin. The first evidence of tiger activity whilst we had been in the forest. After breakfast we headed in the vehicles towards the bridge and the camera trap that should have caught Achkarik as he patrolled the road marking the other day. As we followed the road down, back the way we entered the forest, we noticed some aspects to the tracks that we missed in the night. Namely a large scat in the middle of the road, containing the coarse hairs of wild boar we knew the last meal Achkarik had had before he started his patrolling. With so much scent marking it was clear that the kill site was not very fair, tigers mark more frequently when they have just made a kill and this was in evidence here with many scrapes along the road. Along the way Alexander needed to make a couple of phone calls and one of the places in the forest where phone reception is available is down a small trail around 10 minutes into the forest, so we all walked down and walked into the forest through virgin snow. It is a popular trail with tigers too however we only found wild boar, wapiti, Siberian roe deer and sable tracks along the way. In the trees some Eurasian nuthatches were heard and a solitary long-tailed tit took off and flew away down the trail in the direction of the vehicles.

From here we went to visit the old study centre around 12km from the main base camp. Here an old man named Valeri lives and keeps an eye on the place; Alexander visits him regularly and asks about tiger sightings, and because he is here in his little wooden hut year around, he probably sees more tigers than anyone else. They regularly walk past his house, mostly because he has had a habit of keeping dogs here and not looking after them and so they were regularly killed and eaten by tigers. So all of the tigers in the area know to make a pass by his house to see if there is an easy meal to be had. Since the 3rd in the last 2 years was killed because of his negligence Alexander told him he is not to be trusted with another dog but he had a new dog this trip and luckily this dog had learnt to hide underneath one of the buildings to avoid the tigers at night. Martin just hoped that when he returns in November the dog has survived the summer, but past experience would suggest this would not be the case. Alexander regularly meets with Valeri as well as all of the other residents and users of the forest in order to maintain good communications and also get an idea of any recent tiger movements or poaching activity; it is a great way to have many eyes in the forest. On this occasion Valeri hadn't seen any tigers recently and there were no fresh tracks around his base.

In between the study centre and the bridge we found where Achkarik had lay down in the snow, in the half sphinx position (common in cats) we could clearly see his tail imprint and where his feet, legs and elbow had been in the snow. He had melted the snow significantly, showing he had been here for some time. Taking a rest and maybe digesting his wild boar. We collected the SD card from the camera trap and headed back to the base camp, to check the SD card and also for lunch.

Snow started to fall around lunchtime and at lunch we were told that the camera trap hadn't triggered, presumably the distance between the tree (where the camera was attached) and the far side of the bridge (where he crossed) at night was too far for the camera's sensor. But with this small disappointment behind us we headed to a small winter cabin in the forest around 5km along a snow mobile trail this afternoon. This particular cabin is located along a very well used tiger trail with numerous prominent scent marking trees along the way. This and many other cabins located throughout these forest reserves and are free for hunters and trappers to use during winter. The hunter or trapper will be given a permit for a certain number of animals they can catch or hunt or fish; whilst out in the forest they are welcome to stay at these cabins (leaving them as they found them) and they are kept in good repair. This cabin is in better condition than many as Alexander knows us tourists visit here and there is an old cabin nearby which only stopped being used around 7 years ago (which gives you an indication of what many of the cabins are like nowadays), in fact this cabin has a broken window and has been used by a brown bear late last year to sleep in! The other winter cabin is a nice place to watch some of the hardy forest birds from as seeds are left for them on the window sill and marsh tits, Eurasian nuthatches, Eastern great tits, greater spotted woodpeckers and pine buntings are often seen here.

The main reason for trying this trail was that Alexander thought that there maybe a female tiger in this area and he wanted to check for tracks. There was no fresh tiger evidence and after resting a while we headed back to the base camp with only deer and wild boar tracks along the trail. Around 1cm of snow had fallen this morning and by the look of the clouds the snow was set to fall for a while longer yet. Meaning that the chances of finding fresh tracks would be reduced until the snow had stopped.

Day 4 Forest Reserve

Tiger Tracking

The temperature was once again -12°C but the snow was falling relatively heavily this morning. Around 2cm had fallen and settled overnight and we waited until 11am before going out to give the snow some chance to stop, but it didn't look like it was going to stop, so we headed out with Ivan to investigate a Asiatic black bear hibernation site. This was the same tree hole that we had watched a video of Achkarik climbing up to have a look inside on one of Alexander's camera trap footage. Some tigers have learnt that bears are easy to kill and good to eat (with such high fat supplies) during their hibernation.



The tree is located in a beautiful area of true taiga forest around 3km away from the base camp, so we set out with Ivan guiding the way as the snow fell around, making a magical winter wonderland.

In this area there are less silver birch and instead you can see true taiga forest. The taiga forest is continuous for hundreds of miles to the north (until the Arctic tundra takes over and is distinguished by its absence of trees) and stretches from Scotland and Iceland through Scandinavia, Russia into Canada and even as far east and south as New England in the USA. Here at the reserve the taiga is at its most southerly and it mixes here with the more temperate Manchurian rain-forest that is more prominent along the Sikhote Alin mountains and the coast of Primorye.

It is this habitat that is preferred by the tigers and it is only here in the surrounding forests of the reserve; in the farthest north-west of the tigers distribution; that you get the tiger living in the taiga. It is this mixing of the forests here that results in the more Asian species such as tigers, leopards, Asiatic black bear, yellow-throated martens and musk deer sharing the same habitat as northern boreal species such as brown bears, Eurasian lynx, wolves, wapiti, sable and Siberian roe deer. Most of the forest that we have been travelling through since arriving at the base has been heavily logged in the past (prior to Alexander acquiring the lease in 1993) and the secondary forest growth is dominated by silver and 3 other species of indigenous birch trees, there is also the *Schisandra* vine, thorny arelia, oaks, walnuts, cedars and pine trees. The major difference in what is true taiga forest compared to the secondary birch dominated forest around here is that the most common tree is the larch and taiga has much higher tree diversity. The whole basis for the rich ecosystem here is founded in the presence of large seed bearing trees such as cedar, Manchurian oak, Manchurian walnut and Korean pine. These massive and slow growing hard woods were naturally the first to be targeted by the loggers in the 1950's-1980's and there are very few stands remaining. The odd Manchurian oak, Manchurian walnut or Korean pine still can be seen in the forest and Alexander has a small stand of Manchurian oak in his reserve that somehow remained unknown to the loggers. These acorns are the main source of food for the wild boar which is the number one prey animal for tigers. The whole ecosystem is dependent on the presence and mast success of these few species but in particular the tiger's continued survival is inextricably linked with the Manchurian oak. So seeing some areas of primary taiga forest is very refreshing and gives hope that the thriving tiger population here can continue to be thriving into the future. In this area the amount of Asiatic black bear nests in the trees are very high and there is one particular tree which is hollowed out and the usual hibernation spot for a bear during. The Asiatic black bears like to hibernate inside hollow trees and can squeeze into surprisingly small spaces, whilst the brown bears prefer caves and holes further up the hills and slopes. The black bears are also heavily predated upon by tigers and tigers often check the hibernating trees for sleeping bears. Several of the more well-known hibernating trees can be found to have tiger scratch marks on the outside where tigers have attempted to get into the tree. We would have no real safe way of knowing if the tree was occupied by a bear, as it would be rather foolish to wake up a hibernating bear but it certainly could be currently occupied. As it was it seemed likely the bear was not in the tree as snow had built up around the entrance of the hole and when Ivan cleared the snow away there was no activity from within.

Along the way Ivan pointed out wild boar tracks as well as the various trees, lindens, cedars, oaks, walnuts the cork tree with an interesting yellow bark which is good for sore throats when boiled into tea. There were some woodpeckers around, making fleeting appearances in the canopy before disappearing into the deep tangle of branches. We returned to the base camp and before lunch Viktor, Ivan, Susan, Sarah, Sophie and Kathy all went for another short walk into the forest.

After lunch at around 03:00pm we headed out in the vehicles and within 200m of the base camp we found Achkarik's tracks. He had jumped down off the road onto a frozen stream and walked towards the winter cabin trail. He had been so active around here that it is very likely it was he that Susan had heard the other morning. We followed his tracks that had to be from last night or today (as they were not there when we were here last evening), however the falling snow was making aging the tracks difficult. Following them further we found more scat and it was only half frozen (we later found out that he had walked here at around 11:00pm last night (as he walked past a camera trap) and the temperatures were not cold enough to freeze his scat solid. The scat was full of wild boar hair and we were now certain he had made a kill in the vicinity. We looked for where he had entered the forest and where the kill was likely to be but we couldn't find it (Sergey would look again for us tomorrow) and we carried on down the road. We came to an area that had flooden in the autumn and the water was now frozen and over the road. When the thaw comes (in the coming weeks) this area of road would become impassable and so we cut a small channel in the ice and allowed much of the water to drain away to the otherside of the road. Another example of the constant management needed to live and work in the forest here during the harsh winter months. We were also overtaken by a snow plough that Alexander had hired to clear the road here and also along the mountain pass. This is the road we would take to get to the tiger's popular 'post office' and also the Utyos Rehabilitation Centre and so it was important that they worked on clearing the road for us.

We didn't find any more tracks and with the snow continuing to fall we hoped for better tracking conditions tomorrow, we would be heading to the rehabilitation centre tomorrow and so a slightly earlier start tomorrow due to the longer drive than usual.



Day 5 **Utyos Rehabilitation Centre**

Tiger Tracking & Sightseeing

At -24 °C this morning the temperature had fallen significantly last night, at some point the snow had stopped (adding around another 2cm to the ground) and the skies had cleared. The plough had been unable to clear the mountain pass and so we would be leaving for the rehabilitation centre along the longer route and via the village. This worked out as Alexander was due to meet a director from the BBC who wanted to meet and discuss the logistics about filming in the reserve in a couple of weeks. So we would meet him in the village and then Alexander would discuss business in at Utyos.

At Utyos we would see the work being done by a handful of people in Far Eastern Russia (largely self-funded; although they do receive international support from various NGO's including the British based David Sheppard Wildlife Foundation and the Russian based Phoenix Fund), who dedicate their lives to protecting tigers that have come into conflict with humans, tigers that would ultimately face a certain death without any intervening help; and whilst here we would also be able to see one of these incredible tigers in the snow of the Russian Taiga forest. Along the way we would be visiting different tigers' territories and a couple of transects that are very valuable to the overall tiger censuses. After a short stop at the large village of Bitchoi to visit the shop we carried on. This is the largest village around here and we bought some drinks and snacks before heading off and travelling through several smaller and more traditional villages on our way to the rehabilitation centre, these villages were once thriving communities but since the fall of the Soviet Union the villages have been abandoned by the government and since then many of the farms have been bought by the Chinese and Koreans, during the summer growing season the owners bring their own Chinese labourers in and so the local people are left with even less space for growing, as well as less job opportunities and the spiral continues to deepen.

Most of the crops grown here are potatoes and corn however in the winter these fields are pristine and snow covered. During the winter the major source of income for the local people is selling the cedar cones that they can find during the autumn. Interspersed between the villages were small stands of forest and we searched these stands of forest for birds such as eagles, buzzards, hawks and owls. On the way down to the centre Sophie spotted When we arrived we were introduced to the staff and resident vet Yana. The centre was established by Vladimir a rough-legged buzzard and on the way back we had three Ural owl sightings, including one stooping down to make a kill in the fields next to the road.

Kruglov in 1991, Vladimir used to be employed to catch Siberian tigers alive using nothing but ropes and a large sack. These animals were sold to zoos and circuses and during his life he caught over 40 tigers like this. Then he caught one particular tiger for a circus but this tiger had a missing canine and the circus refused to take him. He was caught as a cub after his mother was killed by poachers however his injuries and missing canine meant that Vladimir could not risk releasing this tiger back into the wild. So he built a large enclosure on his land, this was the birth of the rehabilitation centre and from this he started to rescue other animals (tigers, bears, foxes, lynx and deer) any animals that were reported orphaned or injured on roads or by hunters were taken in by Vladimir with the aim of helping them recover or grow to independence age before being released into the wild. Some of the animals however are too badly injured or too dependent on people to ever be released and so they are kept at the rehabilitation centre and given as good a life as they can provide. They also become very important ambassadors for conservation and education around here. The most famous of these was of course the tiger that started all of this, named Lyuti he was probably the most famous Siberian tiger in the world and also the most photographed, he also helped to raise much needed money for conservation and research into Siberian tigers during the 21 years he was kept at the centre. Vladimir himself died after a tree fell on him in 2005 and when Lyuti died in 2012 he was also buried with Vladimir and as is tradition in Russia the tombstones have pictures of the deceased on them. Vladimir's is probably the only tombstone in the world that has a picture of a Siberian tiger on it next to him. Before arriving at the centre we visited the small cemetery and saw the grave and beautiful tombstone. Since his death the centre is run by his son Erdo Kruglov, he was not here today so one of his staff showed us around. Currently the centre is home to a two Siberian roe deer and a Asiatic black bear cub. In the winter of 2014-15 they also has two Siberian tigers which had been caught as they were hanging around a village. They were caught at around 20 months old and were most likely orphaned by poachers. Without their mother around to make sure they take the correct prey (wild boar and deer) they are likely to take 'easier' prey such as livestock, dogs and possibly people. Being so close to a village the authorities decided that they are best captured and placed in the rehabilitation centre until they are old enough and conditioned to their natural prey and then released into a protected reserve far away



from villages. This is where Utyos comes in, there are a couple of such centres in the Russian Far East but Utyos has the best record in terms of successfully rehabilitating tigers. It is always a risk when releasing a top predator into the wild, they sometimes get too used to people and seek them out, and they sometimes get too stressed out and do not live a normal wild life. However the alternative of leaving them involves a far higher chance of them coming into contact with people in a negative way. The general consensus with Siberian tiger rehabilitation is that is if it increases their chance of long term survival by a fraction of a percent then it is worth doing. These tigers (and all tigers that they are planning on releasing) are kept off display, they have the bare minimum human contact and are kept in enclosures around 1km away from the rest of the centre, the overall point is to make them hate people, the idea is that they do not have any happy memories about people and so when released they stay away from people as much as possible. Only by doing this will they stand a chance of living a good and long life in the wild. There is a live video feed from their enclosures and they can see the tigers and they are monitored 24 hours a day. The tigers are provided with live prey around once per month, so that they can hone their hunting skills and remain as wild as possible. They are also provided food that contains vitamins, medication and things that the tiger needs to ensure it is parasite free and healthy before release. These two tigers were released in the spring time (2015) and by all accounts have been doing well and there has been no further reports of them causing problems.

The last wild tiger the centre had was an adult female in December 2016, she had been hanging around a local village and had killed a couple of dogs. After being brought here she was kept in the large semi-wild enclosures and they were awaiting confirmation as to where she could be released. Then a storm came along and knocked a tree down and onto the fence, the tigress escaped and luckily hasn't been reported as causing problems with the locals anymore (hopefully she has associated the fences, being captured, tranquilised etc with people and will stay away from now on) and so they have no plans to recapture her.

We then went to meet the famous tiger Zhorik. At 6 years old this male tiger was a performing tiger in a the Kurgansky circus when it got a chicken bone lodged in its cheek, this wound became infected and the circus could not care for the animal and so the centre took custody of the tiger. The odds were definitely stacked against Zhorik making it as the infection was getting gangrenous, however with funding from the David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation and WWF, Utyos was able to operate on the cheek and jaw. With the expert help of a veterinarian team led by Dr. Karen Dallakyan and 19 operations later Zhorik now has perfect health and a life. He will never be able to be released into the wild, having been hand reared and being far too comfortable around humans as well as not being able to hunt (the results of the operations meaning that most of the left hand side of his upper jaw has been removed including all of the teeth on the upper left quadrant – this was because the infection had spread this far); however Zhorik now has an important role to play as he follows in the footsteps of Lyuti as an ambassador for all Siberian tigers. School children visit this centre and Zhorik is probably the only tiger that they will ever see and hopefully they gain an appreciation for this incredible animal and through the hard work that Erdo is doing here the next generation of Russians grow to love the tiger and its habitat and continue the upward trend of tiger numbers in this part of the world. With increasing numbers of tigers in Russia (bucking the trend from elsewhere in the tiger's range) and the abundant space and prey populations in the vast Russian wilderness this is probably the last hope that tigers have for their long-term survival. We enjoyed our time with Zhorik, it is hard to see a tiger of this size and power in an enclosure (around 1 acre in size) and even harder to see the disfigured face of the beautiful tiger. But when you consider the alternative fate of this individual and the need for heightened education and awareness the ends do justify the means here. With Zhorik being an ex-circus tiger he is very friendly to people and mock stalks us, charges and then jumps at the fence. All a show and wanting to play he shows us the behaviours that make the tiger such a formidable predator in the snow. Their huge paws acting like perfect snow shoes and their senses all focused intently on the target, it is remarkable how anyone would want to kill such an incredible animal but with more people joining tours like this in the future we can start to buck the trend in poaching by making alive tigers more valuable to local people, communities and economies than a dead poached individual. This is a long process but one that can be done, it has worked with mountain gorillas, whales and certain species of sharks such as great-white sharks and it should work equally well for tigers as well as other mammals like rhinos, elephants, jaguars, polar bear and many others. After around 45 minutes with Zhorik we left and had lunch in the centre's headquarters. Around the rehabilitation centre there were many bird species around including Eurasian bullfinches, marsh tits, greater spotted woodpeckers, northern ravens and azure-winged magpies. But most amazingly were the tracks of a young male (possibly one of Kia's cubs from last year) walking from the forest and right into the carpark and towards Zhorik's enclosure. The tigers come straight into the centre and it goes to show that the tigers live in and amongst villages around here. This is how they can get themselves in trouble with poachers and also how problems can arise by taking livestock and possibly (and very rarely) people.

Mark had been commissioned to sculpt a tiger and whilst here was gathering inspiration about the tigers, taiga forest and the whole wonderful frozen world of the tiger and so we had a little photo shoot with Zhorik posing nicely next to Mark and his sculpture (with the help of Viktor acting as tiger bait by running up and down the cage for Zhorik to chase him). Zhorik has spent his entire life around people and plays with us up and down the fence line like a dog, stalking us, chasing us and generally loving the attention. It is an incredible opportunity to interact with a tiger like this and see the way they move in the snow.

We had lunch at the centre and then departed, making some stops for food, fuel and pictures along the way. On our return to the base camp Sergey told us that he had found the kill and we would have a look at the remains tomorrow.



Day 6 Forest Reserve

Tiger Tracking

This morning the sun was shining once again and the thermometers showed a temperature of -21°C , but it didn't feel as cold as previous days. As the snow plough had had some difficulty in getting through the mountain pass Alexander had called a friend of his Sergey Nesterov to come along. He is a Colonel in the Russian military and he would help us navigate the pass with his extra snow mobile (as one of Alexander's was not working properly and he didn't want to risk it on the mountain pass). So at 10:30am we set off along the road to check for tiger evidence and also check on and change some camera traps (including setting up one of Phil's camera traps). This road continues for several kilometres and it is this road that the cliff is on, Alexander often calls the rocky cliff the 'Post Office' as the tigers leave important messages here and as nearly all of the tigers in the area and many that pass through sporadically visit to scent mark. When a tiger scent marks the act itself may seem rather trivial to people, scraping the soil or scratching a tree coupled with urination or defecating; however the scent released from inter-digital gland, pre-orbital and anal glands as well as chemicals in the urine are full of hormones and pheromones. These chemicals last between 7-21 days depending on the conditions and can tell other tigers information such as the sex, age, dominance, physical fitness, reproductive state and also when the animal last ate (and possibly much more that we do not understand yet). This information allows animals of the same sex to avoid occupied territories and also know if the individual holding the territory is fit enough to repel an attack by a rival for the territory and it also tells individuals of the opposite sex of sexual receptiveness for mating. Alexander has camera traps set here and since March 2014 he has caught over 15 different tigers on the camera traps. This area may be single most important area in the whole northern Khabarovsk tiger's range for tigers. We would not go that far today (as it is a little too far to travel by snow mobile), but we would visit later in the trip.

Today we set off to explore a part of the forest that Alexander and his team have not been down since December and he had high hopes for tracks and also tigers on his camera traps. Initially the only tiger tracks were old as we headed towards a main road. At the main logging road (although only commonly used outside of winter) we turned right (instead of left which would lead to the cliff and beyond Utyos) and immediately the trail become very tough with the snow mobiles struggling to make ground, the powdery snow being a problem and a few trees needing to be chainsawed to make the pathway. However the rewards for this were great with many different tiger tracks (at least three different recent tracks that Alexander could identify), and some from a female that were very fresh, she had probably heard us approaching and disappeared into the forest to hide from us. This was by far the closest we had come to a tiger so far and she was probably within 50-100m away just watching and waiting for us to move on. After collecting the SD cards from the camera traps set up since December Phil set one up and we headed off to have some tea and vodka in a neighbouring base camp.

After some refreshments with a local hunter and a member of the Nief indigenous people (they are incredibly rare nowadays with only a few dozen remaining) we carried on to our base camp and a hot banya and hearty dinner. Later than evening we checked the SD cards we had collected and found at least two different tigers, including Obor an adult male and the adult female we had seen the fresh tracks of. We also had Eurasian lynx and incredibly a lone wolf on the camera traps. It is very unusual to have wolves in the forest where there are so many tigers, in the last 10 years Alexander has only recorded one previous wolf in the and around his base camp and that was a little over 18 months ago.

It was a long day but a good one with some excellent tiger evidence and some fantastic pictures and videos on the camera traps, tomorrow we would head to Gvasyugi village and meet some local Udeghe people and of course look out for wildlife along the way.



Day 7 Gvasyugi Village

Tiger Tracking & Cultural Sightseeing

This morning was the coldest yet with the temperature at -32°C as the clear skies had lasted all night and some of the residual heat had been lost over night. This morning after breakfast we would go to visit the local Udeghe village.

In the entire world it is estimated that there are no more than 50 tribes who still live out their lives in as much of a traditional way as possible. In the Russian Far East there are two such tribes left in existence, the Nanai and the Udeghe. The Udeghe are more numerous and in the Khabarovsk Krai (district) there are around 600 (out of a total population of 2,000) and the village of Gvasyugi has a population of around 250. This village is of cultural importance as it is the home of Valentina, the village elder and one of the most prominent members of the Udeghe culture. She has single handily translated their language and alphabet into Russian and also published many books on the Udeghe language; in an attempt to save the language from extinction. She has also established the



museum at the village and teaches the young women in the village the traditional and important beliefs and skills that would have otherwise been lost. Skills such as producing their stunning traditional dress and knowledge of how to perform their dances and songs were on the verge of being forgotten as the modern world, alcohol and other temptations start to have larger and larger impacts on their daily lives. The sad part is that once Valentina dies (she is 82) who will take this over, who will be the protector of the Udeghe's culture? It is hoped by Valentina, Alexander and Martin that if more people visit here for the tiger tracking and experience the wilderness as well as the Udeghe culture that the next generation will be value and profit in their culture and the surrounding forests. So that both are protected and secured into the future.

Driving along the forest roads and then the main roads (as the quicker road is a mountain pass and with the temperatures not being as cold as they should be and the recent snow fall we had had we were not sure if risking the mountain road would be a good idea, so we took the longer way around on the main roads instead) to the village we would once again be looking for signs of tigers and other wildlife. Along the way we found tracks of a female tiger crossing the road, this is the territory of a female who is known to have had a litter of 3 cubs back in October and so it is possible it is her, we would investigate in the coming days. These were the only tracks of note, with various wild boar, roe deer, red fox, sable, mountain hare, mice, shrews and Siberian weasel making up the usual suspects in terms of tracks.

Then heading to the village on the main roads we didn't see much, we made a small stop for coffee and perosky (a sweet or savory stuffed pastry) before making it back into the forest nearer to the village. Then Alexander found tracks of a large male tiger on the road, they were old (maybe 4 days old), but a good sign. They are of a male that he knows lives around here but he has failed to get pictures of his on the camera traps.

We then arrived at the village of Gvasyugi; the village was started in the 1930's when three local tribes merged and formed the permanent settlement. On arrival at the village we were immediately met by Alicia, she is the



granddaughter of Valentina (who was ill in hospital currently) and firstly she took us to their museum in a nearby building. This is the life's work of Valentina and we had a tour of their museum, the museum is made up of two sections, first the outdoors section which contains traditional style buildings, store huts and a shrine. The use of bark as insulation, roofing and walls was particularly interesting and the little shrine was complete with an idol to the forest god Amba. Also in this small section was a very small cone shaped wooden hut that is where a woman would have traditionally gone to give birth. She would also stay there with her new-born baby (completely isolated from anyone else) for 2 weeks. Inside the museum (the second section) we were shown the traditional dress, some carvings, equipment such as spears, arrow heads, idols and masks. Also in the museum room were the very few and limited texts on the Udeghe people, including Valentina's own publications. They also included some interesting rock art information, from a cave in the north-east from the village which bears a striking similarity to rock art found in Hokkaido (northern Japan) and made by the Ainu people. The connections between the various tribal people and the relatedness of each is poorly understood and clearly more research is needed to understand the complex relationships between the people of Manchuria, Amur, Korea and Japan. We were shown the importance of the birch tree as most of the dishes, bowls and handicrafts are made from birch bark.

We then headed back to the community hall where we were treated to some traditional songs and dances performed by women and children from the village in their traditional dress. Unfortunately many of the older women were sick and so only the children danced for us and also with so few Udeghe people left and with the culture dying out without practising these dances for tourists and with the help of Valentina these dances and songs are likely to be lost forever.

We were shown the wapiti dance which was used during the hunting season and includes a birch bark horn being blown and strange looking instruments made from a type of woody reed which is hollow and can be played by inhaling through the reed. We were also treated to the song and dance of the sowing of their traditional dress and a rattle dance as well as the dance of the bear cubs playing together. The final song was a more modern interpretation of a fire dance and was quite a change of pace but the children doing the dance clearly enjoyed the dances and enjoyed meeting and hearing about us and where we had travelled from to get here. We then lunched at the cultural centre a traditional meal of greyling soup with rye bread. The fish were caught in the nearby Khor River.

After the late lunch we started our journey back towards the base camp, the journey home was largely uneventful with no fresh tracks and we finally arrived back at the base camp well after dark, ate and watched a documentary filmed in the reserve with Alexander and then rested after a good long day.

Day 8 Forest Reserve

Tiger Tracking

Today the temperature was still pretty cold at -17°C and the skies were still blue, under this beautiful sky we would head to the Post Office today. The cliff face that is one of the most popular spots in the region for all of the tigers in



the area. As the mountain pass is still impassable we would head back out of the forest to the village and then skirt the forest and enter it on the far side. It would be a longer journey than usual the cliff is an incredible place to visit and Alexander has several camera traps there which would need checking. Before breakfast Sergey (Alexander's son), Sergey (the Colonel) and Nikolai had set off via a combination of snow mobiles and vehicles to the cliff and beyond to see if the road could be cleared or made drivable. We would meet up with them later today at a neighbouring base camp.

We set off in Alexander's pick up and the old Soviet van with the other Alexander driving; along the way as a passed through the white birch forest nearer the village than the base camp we found the female tiger (who's tracks we had seen yesterday) crossing back from one side of the forest to where she came from yesterday. She sprayed a tree en route back into the forest. They were from this morning, before Nikolai had driven down here as his tracks were over hers. We still think that this female has a litter, we know she had 3 cubs originally however in November we only found 2 sets of tracks following her and now we had seen her moving around without any sign of the cubs. A thorough investigation would be needed around here to see if we could find any more evidence of the cubs to be conclusive about their fate. We then left the forest and headed around the perimeter of the forest, after a shop stop for our packed lunch we entered the forest again. Just like near the village the edges of the forests are ringed by a white birch forest. This is because these sections (being closest to the villages) were the first to be logged and received the heaviest logging and also because the areas are quite boggy and the white birch is more suited to these conditions than the other trees found on the higher ground. This white birch forest is the core area of Bucksa's territory, this is one of Martin's favourite tigers. She has raised two litters of cubs in the time he had been visiting the reserve and the footage collected from the camera traps (particularly at the cliff) are just incredible. It is like he has followed the lives of these cubs from birth and so we all had our eye peeled for tracks as we headed deeper into her territory.

She is currently known to have a litter of 3 cubs and so we hoped to find evidence of these cubs to check if they are all ok. They are 1 year 4 months old and beginning to test their independence and spend more and more time away from their mother.

We did find tracks from Bucksa, made within the last 24 hours and heading from one side of the forest, across the road and back into the forest. Then further along the road we found very fresh tracks from one of her cubs, possible the female cub as the size of the paw, was quite small. These could have been made any time in the last couple of hours. They were not fresh enough to have just been made within a few minutes but still had tell tale signs of crisp snow around the edges and the chances are that the cub is still around and active in the forest. We kept our eyes peeled even more as we carried on towards the cliff, finding wild boar, squirrel, hare and very fresh American mink tracks. This area saw the accidental introduction of American mink in the 1960's-70's when animals kept in fur farms escaped.

At 02:15pm we arrived at the cliff, there were adult male tiger tracks heading down from the cliff to the road, from around 2 days ago and we followed his tracks back along the road. He had come down the road from towards the base camp. Hopefully he would be caught on one of the camera traps around the cliff and we could identify him. Climbing up to the base of the cliff we collected SD cards and add fresh ones and batteries to the camera traps, we followed in the footsteps of the tiger as they meandered through the trees to find the perfect marking tree; an old birch leaning to one side and discoloured from years (maybe decades) of spraying. The scent was still detectable to us as were some of the tiger's cheek hairs. Caught in the bark as the tiger rubbed his face to add even more of his scent to the area. As we approached the cliff we walked around to the top of the cliff, along the way there were tracks of a tiger following a very straight and direct track up and around the cliff as well as another set that wandered more and was likely made by a cub. More interested in exploring and adventure than the boring and mundane process of scent marking and territory defence.

The views from the top of the cliff are stunning, looking out over the forest beyond and standing in the same spots where many of the tigers come to survey their territory is a surreal and humbling experience. We then left the cliff and headed for lunch and to meet both Sergeys and Nikolai at the other base camp, along the way we found more tiger tracks from last night. There had been lots of tiger activity here over the last 2-3 days. The Colonel had spotted a mountain hare and raccoon dog on the road as he tried to get through on his snow mobile earlier this morning and as Alexander started speaking to some of the forestry workers at the base camp one of them told us a story, that in the 20 minutes since we first saw him at the cliff and now he had seen very fresh wild boar tracks, gone to investigate and spotted a tiger! Now this gentlemen didn't exude a sense of reliability on this count, so we took his sighting with a pinch of salt and had some lunch.

Afterwards we started the long journey back to the base camp and were back in Bucksa's core range quickly. It was then then that Viktor shouted 'TIGER, TIGER, TIGER!' from the back seat of Alexander's car. Just 10m into the forest and barely hidden by the sparse saplings in between stood a beautiful orange, black and white marvel of evolution. Having seen vehicles in the past she stood there still and expected the strange noisy, smelly thing to roll on by and ignore her; but when it stopped and it was clear that her camouflage hadn't worked, she dropped to the floor, crouching in a defensive posture trying to hide behind 30cm of snow. Ears erect and focused in our direction her amber gaze stared straight at the vehicle and the strange animals inside, now pointing cameras and binoculars in her direction and excitedly trying to keep their composure. Hearing the distant rumble of the second vehicle she stood in a half crouch and slung off quickly to more cover around 50m into the forest and slowly melted away into the forest and out of sight.



What an encounter! Incredible, becoming some of the very few (almost certainly in the first 100 non Russian, Chinese) people to have ever seen and especially photographed a wild Siberian tiger. The whole encounter lasted 2-3 minutes but the impression would remain for years to come. We came to the conclusion that she was most likely one of Bucksa's female cubs. Being within the size range of a 1.4yr old cub and also well within the right territory; but more than that it was the fact that she was naïve enough to not bolt or run for dense cover at the sound of the first vehicle would make her likely to be a cub with little experience of coming across vehicles on her own in the forest. However the age, sex and reasoning behind her actions didn't matter one iota at the moment, what a sighting and what a way to end an incredible day in the forest! Well I say end however the journey home produced sightings of two red foxes in the frozen fields, one of which was hunting for rodents underneath the snow. Watching him pinpoint the location of the hidden prize and then pounce high and plunged head first into the snow was a great sight.

From here the rest of the drive was largely uneventful with no further animal sightings and no more fresh tracks, but when we checked the camera traps after dinner we found pictures and videos of four different tigers over the last 2 days around the cliff. Firstly Bucksa and her female cub (almost certainly the tiger we had seen today) and male cub, of which we christened her Sophie. Alexander doesn't name the cubs until he is sure they will survive until adulthood and with this one in good health and looking to leave the protective arm of Bucksa in the coming months we thought the name of the first woman to see her was an appropriate name. We also found videos of Achkarick scent marking the tree (it was his scent we could still smell and his cheek hairs we had seen on the big birch tree). It was the first time he had been seen here, it was well outside of his territory and it appeared that after he had made the wild boar kill Sergey had found on the opposite side of our base camp (some 25km at least) away from here he had walked here and was scent marking like he owned the place. There are two likely possibilities as to this behaviour, the first being that he has been attracted to the site by the smell and perhaps sounds (roaring) of a female looking to mate and so he is advertising his presence as a means of finding a mate. The second being that he has been forced out of his territory by another male and was looking to take over a new place and exploring for a new tiger-free location. This seemed less likely as he had been so active and scent marking his normal routes within the last few days and we had not found any evidence of other large adult males in his territory recently. Whatever the reason his presence in the territory of Bucksa and her still (as of now) semi-dependant cubs was a danger to the cubs. He is not the father and would kill them if he came across them, so for the final few weeks of Bucksa's motherhood over this litter she would have to keep them safe from a male who is maybe looking for her for mating.

The day to day lives of the tigers here is clearer than ever thanks to Alexander and his network of trails, many friends in the forest who keep an eye on tigers (which brings me to his friend who claimed to have seen a tiger today at lunch, maybe he also saw the cub we saw as it was in the same area and time) and camera traps. This is a truly special place and somewhere anyone interested in the natural world, conservation or tigers should visit. Certainly tigers get seen and captured on camera traps here more regularly than anywhere else in the world! What a day! What a day! We hoped for similar success tomorrow.



Day 9 Forest Reserve

Tiger Tracking

This morning the skies were still clear, the birds were active around the base, the thermometer read only -6°C and the excitement of yesterday's tiger sighting had not faded as we breakfasted. Then at 11:00am we left with Sergey and Ivan to follow in the footsteps of Achkarick and find out where he made his kill the other day. We drove around 3km down the road and then entered the forest. Walking in single file we followed the tiger as it hunted the wild boar. It is likely that he heard or smelt the wild boar from the road (as he made a bee-line to them from the road) and started to walk slowly and cautiously towards them. The wild boar had been around this area for some time, they had been foraging among the cedars here, the cedars trees do not accumulate snow underneath them (because they still have their needles) and so with shallower snow the wild boars find it easier to forage. We found the places where the various wild boar had slept and ate. It was likely that the wild boar was asleep when the tiger killed him, there is no evidence of a chase. When we found the kill site ravens cawed from above and the dismembered carcass lay in snow all flattened down and discoloured with blood and the scattered fur and bone littered the area. There were three large bounding leaps from the tiger and then the kill site, so it was likely the wild boar had no idea and was asleep. The large bones, a lot of the tough hair and the entire skull were still there, but the most incredible aspect of this kill was that as we approached the female tiger who had come to scavenge from the kill saw and or heard us and ran off quickly to hide herself. Achkarick had spent around 2 days in the area coming back to the carcass to feed, the amount of scat with wild boar in it was evidence of this, as were numerous areas where he had slept. But the female and her seconds old tracks showed that she had been here this morning and probably trying to break the



big bones for the marrow. There was very little flesh left, so with the female watching us and seeing what we would do and if we would pursue her (which is a foolish action at this point), we had our flares out ready and were Martin, Ivan, Viktor and Phil stood ready whilst we investigated the carcass and the fresh tracks running away from us.

Just like the cub yesterday (but at a greater distance) the tiger was using its camouflage and fantastic hiding ability to hunker down out of sight and watch us with interest. We are lucky that it is not her own kill as she is not defensive about it, if it was her kill she probably wouldn't have left it and would have remained to defend the kill against us. This would and could have easily led to a dangerous situation and one that we always knowingly avoid by not pursuing very fresh tracks. It is just not safe enough and if the tiger has a injurious or fatal encounter with a human, inevitably it would be the tiger that would have to be shot as that is the way all man-eaters are dealt with here.

We then left the scene and walked in the general direction of the female tiger (however not directly to where she ran) and with fingers on the flares and eyes scanning the surrounding forest we walked slowly back to the road and once there started to think about the incredible 24 hours we had had. As Sergey walked the 200m up the road to tell Alexander to bring the vehicle to our new position he heard she roar. Probably happy we were far enough away and not coming back she had returned to the kill and was claiming it as hers.

We then went back to the base camp for lunch, afterwards we decided to head up the hill at the back of the base camp (Little Ambine this is called) and it offers great views, a walk through stunning forest and also good chances of seeing wild boar up there. However just 50m into the forest behind the bear cabin (where Kathy and Sarah were staying) and within line of sight of the banya and a lot of the base camp, we found very fresh tracks from a male tiger. He had come from the direction of the mountains and walked up the snow mobile track we were due to follow. They were very fresh tracks and no older than 2 hours old. That kind of made sense as the dogs were heard barking a lot when we returned from the hike to the wild boar carcass. We put it down to us arriving back, but the dogs would have been able to see the tiger from their enclosures and certainly have been able to smell him. We once again we were not able to follow any further, the tiger could have been 2km away or 20m away and we cannot take that risk. So we turned around and went for a walk down the snow mobile track towards the winter cabin to check for any tracks along there. We didn't see any fresh tracks, the latest being Achkaricks tracks from when he crossed this trail to head towards the cliff (where we caught him on camera trap) from the kill he made around 4 days ago. When we returned we planned to head out on a drive at around 05:00pm, hoping that the male or the female that we knew were active and in the vicinity of the base camp would come out onto the road to scent mark.

Setting off we quickly found where the female had come back onto the road, in between when we returned from our walk to the kill and now the tigress had come out of the forest and onto the road. We followed her tracks until we lost them on the very compacted snow on the road, we also couldn't find her tracks on leaving the road and heading back into the forest, so for now it was a mystery where she had gone to. We did spot a hazel grouse on the ground in the forest and had good views until it took off and instantly disappeared into the tangle of branches. We then found some fresh Siberian roe deer and wapiti tracks on the hill towards the study centre but then at the study centre we found a disturbing site. Blood and tiger tracks all over the road, it very much looked like a gruesome crime scene on the road, we got out and investigated and found the tiger had come from the collection of houses that Valeri and his dog live in and the tiger was dragging something. We found where she had gone into the forest with the kill, Alexander also found an Ural owl pellet with mouse bones in it (however of a secondary importance to finding out if it was the poor dog that was killed). We arrived at Valeri and him confirmed that at around 05:00am this morning a tigress had killed his dog. From the tracks we could see that she came in from the main road (luckily walking in front of a camera trap, so we could identify her later – it was the female called Rochelle and she passed the camera trap at 04:42am this morning), straight to the dog, she crouched and then pounced and with 4 great bounds was on the dog, the chase was short (around 30m) and the tiger got hold of the dog where there was some blood, then dragged the dog around 70m to the road (where we had first seen the blood), the dog was probably still alive at this point, there was not much blood and then on the road (away from the house) the tiger made the kill (leaving the blood we could see) and then dragged the dog away to feed deeper into the forest. If the snow was not too heavy tomorrow we would go and see the carcass. Once again the frustration this Valeri not looking after his dogs properly springs to mind, the main problem (apart from the dog being killed) was that in the area the tigers are now associating the sounds, smells and sights of people with easy food. This can easily manifest itself into a problem tiger and at that point human and tiger lives are in danger and that is something that Alexander and Martin work hard to prevent. Alexander said he will make a cage for his next dog, but had already told Valeri that he was not going to give him any more of his puppies, the last dog he had was given to him from some hunters who passed through as Alexander would not give him anymore.

What a sad end to an incredible and intense day, literally surrounded by tigers today and another incredible day in the Russian Far East. Tomorrow we hoped the forecasted snow storm wouldn't be too bad and we could head out into the forest again, but we would only know more tomorrow when we woke up.



Day 10 Forest Reserve

Tiger Tracking

Today was the second warmest day here in Royle Safaris history with the temperature at dawn measuring +1°C on the thermometer. The snow was falling heavily and around 10cm had fallen overnight, so the chances of fresh tracks were small and the temperature was too warm for snow mobiles. So after breakfast we decided to head down to the site where Rochelle had killed the dog and would try and find where she fed. The forest was incredibly pretty today, each and every branch in the forest had 5-8cm of snow covering it and the result was nothing less than the fictional depiction of *Narnia* or some other fairy tale forest. On the way we stopped at the trail that leads to phone reception as Alexander had a couple of phone calls to make. We followed him down through the deep snow; the northern ravens that had been attracted to the dog carcass from yesterday started to caw and follow us into the forest. Alexander had brought his rifle today (as we would be tracking a possibly still active kill site) and the ravens have learnt that people in the forest with rifles are usually hunters and hunters mean kills which they can scavenge from. The ravens never follow us when we have no rifle with us, a testament to their incredible observational intelligence. One of the phone calls Alexander received was news of an old friend of his (and a friend who he had published books with and also wrote on his behalf about the gold mining industry here and helped Alexander fight off the pressures of the gold miners who wanted his reserve) had died after suffering a stroke. This obviously knocked Alexander and he was subdued for the rest of the day (taking this afternoon off, understandably), the other phone call was to try and arrange a film crew from a local Russian news network to do a piece on Mark and his sculptures of the tiger and wild boar he was working on. They didn't promise anything (with only 2 days remaining in the forest for us, time would be short), but maybe they would show up and we could get some press out there.

From here we travelled down the other side of the hill for around 2km and found where Rochelle had dragged the dog into the forest, we followed her. The trail was in deep snow and the blood splattered snow was still in evidence as we followed the tracks deep into the forest. We walked for around 3km but didn't find where she stopped. We stopped as Nikolai went further and tried to find the carcass, we waited nearby an impression in the snow from a wapiti which had slept here and left a large impression in the snow. The wapiti (probably a female and possibly pregnant) urinated and then defecated nearby before running off into the forest. Nikolai came back having not found where Rochelle had stopped and with her having 2 cubs (around 9-10 months) old it was very likely that she had taken the kill all the way back to them to feed. So we didn't want to pursue any further and risk disturbing her and the cubs and also coming across an angry tigress defending her cubs. We then went further along the road to the large bridge and hoped that Rochelle had crossed the frozen river underneath and we could 100% confirm her identity (at the moment it is only around 90%), but she hadn't walked this far and the camera trap yielded nothing. We did have a nice view of a Ural owl flying through the forest before we turned around and drove back to base camp.

The snow was coming down thick now as we drove closer and closer to home. Then ahead on the left side of the road around 60m up the trail around a bend was the unmistakable sight of a large female tiger slowly and casually padding its way up through the snow. Tigers are often a little 'deaf' in heavy snow and she obviously had not heard us and walked ahead (with us following at a distance) for around 20-30 seconds before she stopped, turned her head, looked directly at us and then in two bounds was lost in the dense forest. We went to where she ran into the forest and the line of tracks led in a straight line right into the heart of some of the densest forest in the reserve. This was incredible, not one but two tiger sightings in the Russian Far East and both within 2 days of each other! This is unheard of and amazing.

We arrived back at the base camp and had some lunch and tried to compose ourselves as we couldn't believe what was happening, the last 2.5 days had been a blur or unbelievable tiger activity; 2 sightings, 2 near encounters of seconds or minutes apart and a kill on a dog outside a man's cabin, as well as investigating a recent kill site. What amazing luck we were having at the moment and we longed for it to continue for at least a couple more days.

At around 05:00pm Ivan took us out for a drive back to where we saw the tiger, we wanted to see if we could find where she came out of the forest and so could get some firm tracks to measure. The tracks we could measure were indicating a small male or large female and Alexander was convinced it was a female, however Martin and the rest of the party in Nikolai's car (who saw this tiger best) thought it was a male, purely the large size, massive head, neck and shoulders. But taking paw measurements in fine powdery snow that is deep and with thick snow falling on top, and the tiger was running was risky to identify any aspect of the tiger. Even when we found where he came on to the road the tracks were not great and the size measured by Ivan could have been a male or large female, with the



shape of the paws (usually a good indicator of sex) not obvious in the deep and powdery snow with a layer of fresh snow on top also. So we turned around to head back to the base for the last time today and close to the base we had amazing views of an Ural owl just around 15m up into a silver birch tree, posing for us for around 5 minutes. Looking at us and then behind it, not bothered by the small flock of northern ravens circling higher and around 50m into the forest, before it took off and silently flew into the forest and out of sight. The ravens were interested however as they were circling, possibly over a recent kill or following a moving tiger. The ravens here (as elsewhere) are known to follow predators as they move through the forest. It was likely that if the male tiger we had seen on the road was following the same trajectory as it left the road (after seeing us) he would be around here at around this time and so maybe the ravens were following him. We would only know more tomorrow or the next day by investigating further. Later that evening it was confirmed that the most likely sex of the tiger we saw was a female, a particularly large bodied female but the paws were just too small for a fully grown male. The female was unknown to Alexander based on the large body size, paw print measurements and also the place where it was seen. The last year was a hard one for the ungulates in the forest (with weather leading to bad yields of nuts and seeds) and so there are many tigers wandering far and wide in search of food and so it is very possibly a brand new tiger to the reserve and one that has not been recorded here before. Only further camera trapping would uncover the truth.

Day 11 Forest Reserve

Tiger Tracking

The temperature had plummeted overnight and with beautiful blue skies the thermometer read -15°C this morning, many birds were once again active around the camp feeding from the feeders and also around the wood chopping area. At 10:30am we headed out for a walk, we drove down past the study centre and over Achkarick's bridge and to a lowland area dominated by silver birch. We would complete a circuit of around 6km, heading up the hills and into true taiga forest, along a beautiful frozen stream and to a mineral salt area and then back through the boggy (in summer) silver birch forest to the road. This walk would take us into 2 female tigers territories, firstly a female with 3 cubs and then on the border of Rochelle's with her 2 cubs. The mineral salt area is a natural one which when not frozen attracts many deer and wild boar as they need the extra minerals and nutrients contained in the mud here. Alexander supplements this with salt licks and salt rich ashes from his fires too. This is much needed extra vitamins and minerals in the winter for the ungulates.

Along the way there was some fresh wapiti tracks and Alexander glimpsed one as it ran off into the forest from the side of the road. We then spotted a stray dog walking down the road, it spotted the cars and darted into the forest and when Martin and Nikolai tried to call and whistle it back it just ran further and further away into the forest. Hopefully the dog would find its way to the base camp or back to its owners, the tracks we saw later indicated that it had come from the direction of the village.

Once we started the walk the blue skies, piercing sun and wonderful forest culminated in one of the most beautiful walks of the trip. Sable, wild boar, hazel grouse, Siberian roe deer and wapiti tracks from this morning were marked the forest with the freshest tiger tracks being one female (most likely Rochelle) bisecting the trail we were on and going up to a tree to scent mark. They were made from 2 days ago and may well have been made on her way to and from killing the dog. Ivan and Alexander showed us a use of the golden birch tree, the outer layer of bark (which flakes off and gives the birch trees there conspicuous appearance) is dead and very dry. By setting it on fire you have a very good beacon if you are lost on the forest or if you have a problem with a tiger and need some defence. Obviously only in winter as it catches fire very quickly and in drier months could lead to a forest fire. As only the outer layer of dead bark is burned the tree is unharmed and by scraping the charred bark away Alexander showed us the fresh and undamaged bark underneath. We were also shown a Asiatic black bear nest, the nest was made with some very large branches and was undoubtedly made by a large male bear, Alexander told us that brown bears (that are too large to climb many of these trees) have learnt to wait underneath the trees that the black bears are up and they feed on the fallen acorns, nuts or pine cones the black bears knock off and drop by accident, wild boars also do this.

We changed the camera trap along the frozen stream and again at the mineral salt area and continued on, the walk here is absolutely stunning with the forest here having to be some of the prettiest in the whole reserve. Back in the silver birch forest and the boggy land in the summer Alexander picked some scented grasses which smell just like eucalypts and also took some clippings of wild rhododendrons for the base camp. We made it back to the cars and drove back to the base camp, a good three hour hike and a great morning/afternoon in the forest.

After lunch we had a little free time, there was some time for a banya, rest, target practice with the rifle at the back of the base camp, looking through tiger pictures with Alexander and Mark continued his wonderful sculptures in the new studio. Then at 06:30pm we headed out in one vehicle to try and see if we could find a third tiger (or any other wildlife), the drive was very quiet, just the slither of a crescent moon in the twilight sky the only observation of note. Phil and Ivan set up a new camera trap near to where we had seen the tiger yesterday and we returned to the base camp for dinner ahead of our last full day in the forest tomorrow.

Day 12 Forest Reserve

Tiger Tracking

Today is the last full day in the forest and with the temperature at -30°C it was definitely Siberian weather for our last day. After breakfast we would wait a little while for the air to get a little warmer, at -20°C we would leave via snow



mobiles with Sergey, Ivan and Nikolai to the winter cabin. There were no fresh tracks along the way of tigers, just some wapiti tracks heading towards another mineral salt area in the forest. The skies were so brilliantly blue today and the winter cabin so picturesque it was rather like stumbling into a fairy tale set as we started a little fire (Phil using his military training to get the fire going in super quick time), to boil some water for limonic tea. The vine which we collect the sour berries from makes an excellent tea. As well as this local tea we had some BBQ'd wild boar belly and sausages and watched the various species of birds feeding on seeds at the window. The eastern great tit, marsh tits and Eurasian nuthatches busy feeding and putting on fat for the rest of winter and in preparation for the spring breeding season. At around 01:30pm we headed back to the base camp and we all had some freetime. Mark (with the help of others) finished off a larger than life snow sculpture of a tiger whilst Alexander prepared the collection of pictures and videos from this trip for everyone. Mark had been busy in his studio this holiday, with 6 incredibly good sculptures completed. He was presenting them in various ways, with Viktor being given a stunning tiger bust. The tiger staring intently with pinned back ears it echoes the tiger that Viktor spotted earlier in the trip. There was a full body tiger leaping and pursuit of prey which would be given to Sergey and another tiger bust, this one looking rather more regal and relaxed, which would be presented to Ivan. Another one was of a tiger sitting proudly with a very detailed and expressive face which Kathy had asked to have once it was cast in bronze and so Mark was taking that back to the UK with him so he can have it cast and then ship it to Kathy in due course. But the piece (or pieces) of resistance where a lying down tiger and sitting wild boar complete with some cedar pine nuts and pine cone (completing the entire food chain here and showing the importance of protecting the trees, the wild boar and therefore the tiger. One cannot do without the other in the longterm. He was to take these home and have them cast in bronze, one set would be sent to Alexander as a everlasting gift whilst a limited edition set of 6 would be cast and sold via Trees For Tigers (Martin's charity set up to help fund raise for reforestation of the reserve and neighbouring forest reserves as well as funding Alexander's continuing research and educational work with the forest and tigers). Mark would also be displaying the sculptures and others in an exhibition in London later in the year and word of the tiger's plight and the intricate nature of saving the trees, wild boar and tiger would be promoted.

So with the BBQ running and the fish being smoked for tonight and the other dinner preparations under way we all took a few minutes out to have a group shot with the snow tiger and one of the safety flares. In a couple of hours would be our farewell meal and celebrations of an incredible trip, one where the forest and the people working here to conserve it and the tigers takes centre stage and one where hopefully long lasting friendships were started.

So at 07:00pm we all gathered in the dining room for the start of our farewell celebrations, a lot of food for dinner coupled with some wine, beer and vodka (and other alcohol we could find), jokes, stories, toasts and singing around the dinner table. Alexander also presented everyone with a signed copy of his Siberian tiger book, a limited edition version which was presented by Vladimir Putin at the Global Tiger Conference in St Petersburg in 2010 to all of the heads of state where tiger currently live. What a wonderful way to end the trip and round off our adventure into the frozen forests of the Russian Far East, the last realm of the striped gentlemen in this stunning habitat.

Tomorrow we would be up earlier than usual to pack up our belongings, load up the vehicles, say our goodbyes and then head back to Khabarovsk. Of course along the way we didn't know what we may or may not bump into and it would be our last chance to see another tiger in the flesh. Also the weather can cause potential problems (although the forecast was good for tomorrow) so setting off with plenty of time is always the best idea.

Day 13 Khabarovsk

Travelling

With the temperature at -25°C we had breakfast as normal and then finalised our packing and loaded up the vehicles. We would be travelling back to the village with Sergey and Ivan so that they can have some time off with their families before coming back to the base camp in a few days. At 10:00am we heading back towards civilisation. Along the way we found very fresh prints of wild boar and spotted a hazel grouse flying into the forest.

The rest of the journey back to the town was largely uneventful, with the exception of a large colony of crows (mostly large-billed crows but with some carrion crows as well) present along the sides of the road on the outskirts of Khabarovsk, also in the trees were 4 very large and regal looking white-tailed eagles. Unfortunately being a main road we cannot stop here and just had to see them through the window as we drove along. We made it to the hotel and checked in around 14:00, we then had a few hours rest and enjoyed hot showers, with Viktor meeting everyone and having a little walk around the city and taking in some of the sights and then in the evening everyone met for dinner in a nearby Georgian restaurant booked for us by Viktor. Afterward we headed back to the hotel for our final night of the tour.

Day 14 Home

Departure

Early this morning Kathy left for the airport with Olga with Phil, Mark, Sophie, Susan and Martin all on the same flight to Moscow in the afternoon leaving at around midday from the hotel. Sarah was staying on one further day and had arranged with Olga the time she would be collected from the hotel tomorrow.

