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WHILE THE BEARS ARE SLEEPING - SKI-TOURING TRIP TO LUZHBA, RUSSIA

What would you typically think of doing in December? At the end of 2016 we were facing this question and the solution was: pack the ski-touring equipment and head off to Siberia! The bears were supposed to be in their winter sleep and, according to reports, the snow conditions at this time of the year were great and the density of skiers low.

The place where we planned to go is called Luzhba, the name of a train station hidden in the forests of the Kemerovo Region in Russia. A small village on the nearby river Tom offers some simple infrastructure for surviving the Siberian winter, in which temperatures can fall as low as about -40° C. Luckily for us, it did not get colder than about -20° or -25° C. Thanks to the continental climate, it stayed dry and windless during the coldest days and actually did not feel that cold.

The mountain range in this area has the poetic name "Podnebesnye Zubija", which means "Heavenly teeth". These teeth we were planning to ski. The average height of the ridges is 1,500-1,700m and the elevation difference varies between 500-700m within 2-3 kilometres. It usually starts snowing in October and by December the snow level can reach 2m. Thanks to dry air and low temperatures, powder conditions last a long time. The total amount of snow during a season can be as much as 10m! As a result, by the end of the winter, the terrain becomes very smooth.

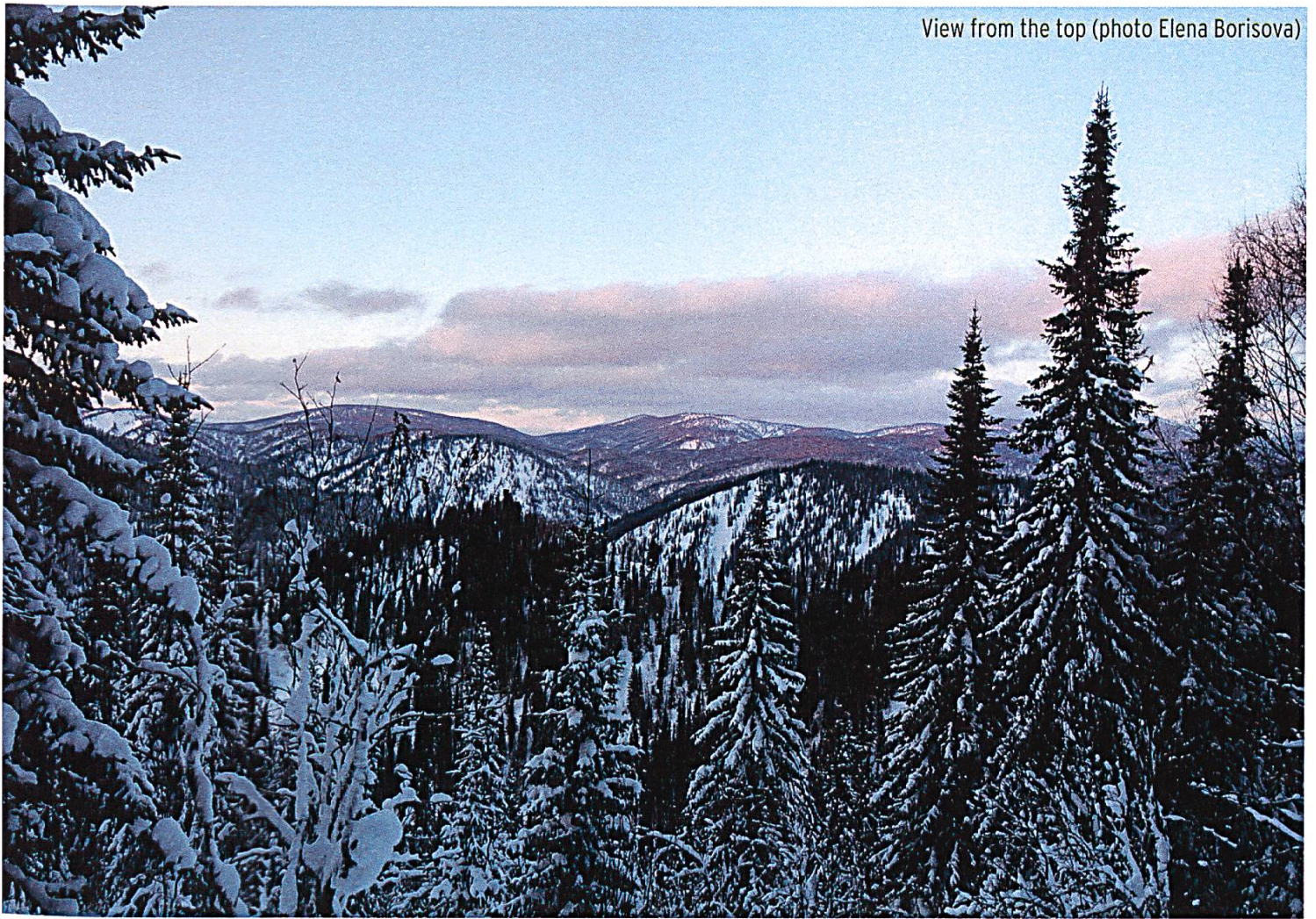
There are about 10-20 small huts in this area that can be used for summer and winter retreats, though ski-touring is still a quite exotic activity. Each hut can host about 10 people. The huts look narrow and

tall from the outside and have two floors. The first floor is equipped with a wood stove for heating and a simple kitchen. The wood stove is called "burguika" in Russian, which takes its origins from the bourgeoisie French revolution that introduced this type of stove; in English, one would call it a "potbelly stove". The upper floor is for sleeping. The huts have running water and electricity, which can sometimes fail. Last but not least, there is also a special Russian sauna hut.

To reach the place, it is possible to fly to Novokuznezk, a city located "not far away" from Novosibirsk, the largest Siberian city and an academic centre. In Siberia distances are measured on a different scale and 400-500km becomes just next door. Flying to Novosibirsk can also be an option as there are many more flight connections, but this would require additional travelling by train or by car. We wanted to save time for skiing and chose a more adventurous option with one flight from Moscow Sheremetyevo airport. Of course this airplane arrived just a little bit too late to catch the official train to Luzhba running once per day. But that was convenient for us since we planned to do some shopping for our week of ski-touring.

The airplane landed in Siberia early in the morning when it was still dark and, as expected, cold. It looked white and we were looking forward to putting on our skis as soon as possible. Unfortunately, when collecting our luggage, we discovered that one pair of skis was missing. While part of the group continued the journey, the other part was working hard and making lots of

View from the top (photo Elena Borisova)



Crossing a deep slope (photo Elena Borisova)

Our home for a week (photo Elena Borisova)



phone calls to organise the delivery of the missing skis on the next day. Fortunately it worked out, but meant again missing the train to Luzhba. Luckily, in Russia, apart from the official trains, there are also unofficial trains, or “workers trains”, which indeed transport some workers who however account for merely about 5-10% of the number of people on the train. Needless to say, we were considered very exotic passengers and everyone was curious as to what we were looking for in Siberia. But we were simply happy that this “workers train” was running, thus saving us one ski-touring day. On the train station we met the rest of our group, together with our two local guides who were familiar with the region.

Luzhba is located approximately at the latitude of Hamburg, so the days are still long enough, even during the darkest month. Our typical ski-touring day started around 9am after breakfast and by 5pm it would already be dark. We would go up through the forest, assess the avalanche situation on the way, and, after reaching the top, choose a line in untouched powder snow. The slopes usually had open areas with fewer trees and were of varying steepness with some snow pillows

on the way. Who knows what is hidden below these pillows – hopefully not the sleeping Siberian bears! After skiing down we would repeat the tour one, two or three more times, either making use of our trail to go up the same mountain but choosing a different way down, or otherwise continuing to the neighbouring mountain. We visited several times the summits of Konchik (1,145m), Medvejia meaning “Bear” (745m), Domashnaya meaning “Home” (686m) and an unnamed more remote peak (~1,000m). One late evening, when the sky was clear and the full moon was shining bright, we went out for a moon ride from the Bear Mountain.

Everyone in the team enjoyed staying in Luzhba and getting to know Siberia in winter. It is a charming place which does not offer very long slopes or rocky alpine terrain but has its special character and offers great skiing early in the season. What more to say? Just to mention a comment from one of the team members: when one day after the snowfall somebody noticed that the snow was a bit heavier, he answered that he did not distinguish between good snow and very good snow.

Elena Borisova