

Powder exploration in Siberia

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On the way back to Tbilisi, we stopped in the former capital and nice old town of Mtskheta and organized a last day trip to the old cave monasteries of Davit Gareja, nearby the border with Azerbaijan. Overall this was a trip we would clearly recommend: The skiing quality is not necessarily

better than in Switzerland, but is excitingly different, and the trip allows one to combine ski-touring with the exploration of new sights, food and people.

Christoph Basten

POWDER EXPLORATION IN SIBERIA

Siberia is known for its massive trove of natural resources, whose exploration started about five centuries ago. Its most precious resource however, the “powder snow”, was discovered only a few years ago and until today its exploitation is limited to few places within Siberia’s enormous territory. In November 2017, a group of seven enthusiasts, which I was lucky to be a part of, went to one of those places called Mamai, to get a taste of Siberian powder skiing. Powder skiing at the beginning of November? That sounded quite early, but Kostya, the local guide who knows the area very well, assured us that we should not worry and rather pack our broadest skis.

The Mamai gorge is located next to Lake Baikal. It was discovered by locals a few years ago. It all started very wild and simple, when people used to come on snowshoes or by foot. They had to carry their skis, snowboards and other equipment on their back and set-up tent villages. Nowadays it’s “Siberian luxury”, with a few small winter huts built in the gorge by enthusiasts to accommodate guests in winter. The huts are very simple, with a stove and eating area on the ground floor and sleeping places un-

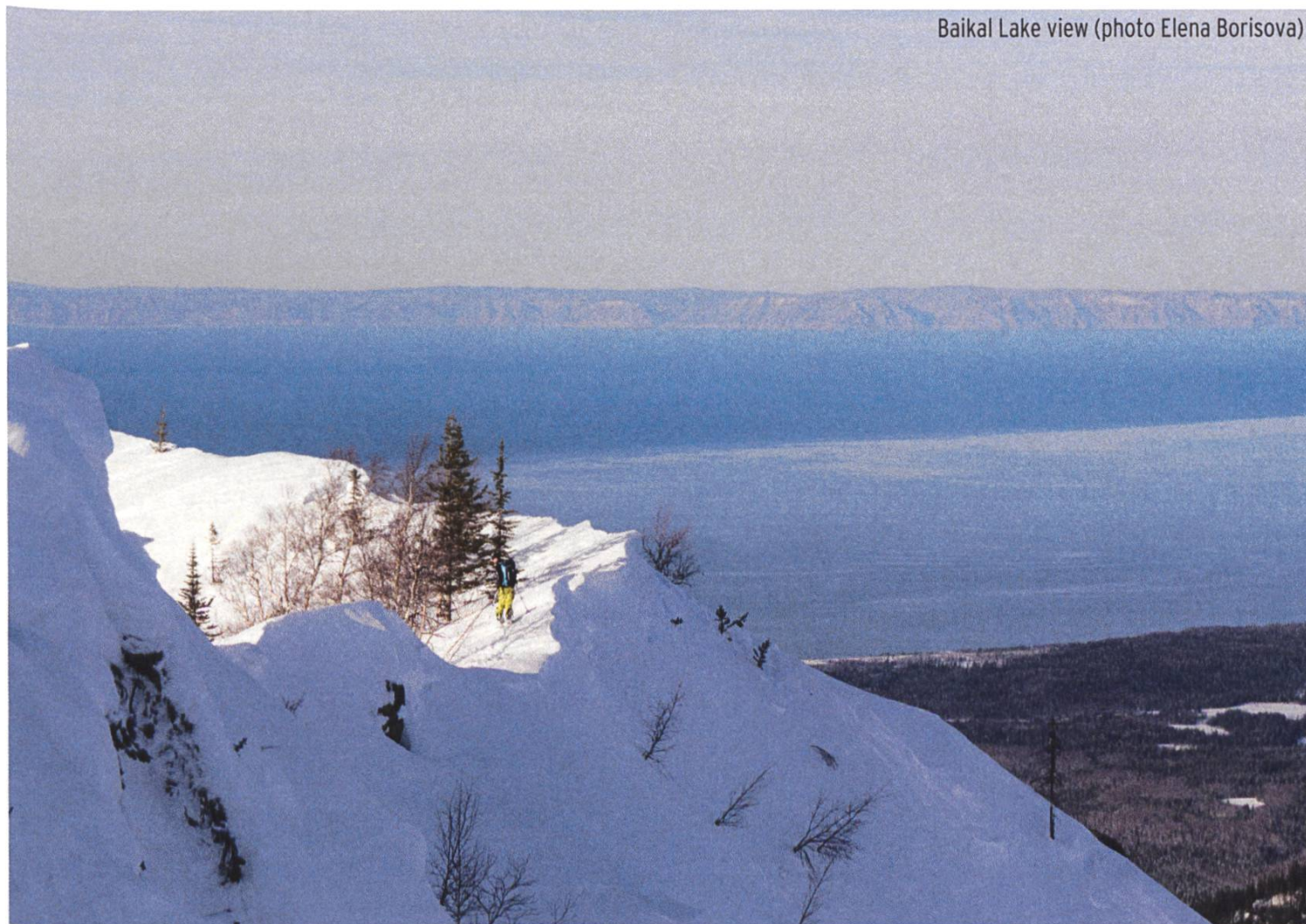
der the roof, where our tallest team member could barely sit. Recently, even a Russian sauna hut called “banja” opened its doors to meet European needs for higher hygienic standards. So that nobody stays too long in the cozy banja, the Russian sauna ceremony includes not only hot vapors and cold snow-diving, but also a brutal massage with a birch broom.

Our journey started in Zurich, from where we first flew to Moscow to get our passports thoroughly checked and where some of us participated in a challenge called “get your avalanche backpack through the Russian customs”. After all was successfully completed, we could relax and cool down on the airplane to Irkutsk, where we were warmly treated by the flight crew who supplied our group with unlimited portions of ice-cream. Ice-cream seems to be THE thing in winter in Siberia. We bet you can warm yourself up eating ice-cream when temperatures drop below -25 °C.

When we landed in Irkutsk, the closest city for transit to Mamai, it was still hard for us to believe that there should be any skiable snow around. We weren’t even able to mea-



The Banja-Sauna hut (photo Elena Borisova)



Baikal Lake view (photo Elena Borisova)

sure a two-centimeter mini-layer of snow. Impossible that there should be two orders of magnitude more snow just 100km further southeast! Nevertheless, we did our heavy grocery shopping and some sight-seeing in Irkutsk. Together with our taxi driver, we solved the puzzle of getting all the equipment into his Japanese van and started our journey to the southern side of Lake Baikal, where the Mamai gorge is located. After all this, we were waiting impatiently to go to the mountains. On the journey, the landscape finally started to look white. At the entrance to the gorge, Kostya was already waiting for us. From this point it was a ski trip of about 8km and 400m altitude gain to reach our base, a cozy little hut. The further we went, the more the landscape looked like a winter fairy tale, and our concerns were finally relieved after seeing a two-meter layer of fresh, well-preserved snow. Such a huge difference in snow conditions between Irkutsk and Mamai is due to the famous snow-lake effect. Cold and dry air arrives from the north, is warmed up and humidified by the Baikal Lake water, but then cools down and results in precipitations on the other side of the lake.

We arrived at the hut in the early afternoon. Finally we had reached the place from where we could start our tours. After the encouraging results of our avalanche training – nobody was able to find and dig out the two beacons in less than 15 minutes – we could not resist any longer and start our first ascent. On our first run we were barely able to breath, not because of the breathtaking lines we could ski, but because the snow was so deep and powdery. A snorkel was definitely needed!

The hut is located at 840m, with summits in the range between 1300m and 1590m. With the tree line being around 1200–1300m, the terrain above has a bit of alpine character, which is combined with the breathtaking slalom powder skiing through the forest in the lower parts. Every day after the first round of walking up and skiing down in the fluffy snow, which from time to time covers you above the head, everyone was up for more. There was enough daylight from about 9am till 5pm for packing as many loops as muscle power in the legs allowed. The important thing was to take care of the skins. Only if warmed thoroughly inside the clothes while skiing down, they were able to still stick to the skis in the cold fluffy snow (except for G3 skins, which stick everywhere and on both sides!).

All together we visited one or more times the following five summits: Kedrovyi (Cedar) Ridge, Dvuchglavaya (Two-Head) Mountain, Miasnoi (Meaty) Hill, Mamai Mountain and the place called Tri Bereziy (Three Birch Trees). It was always possible to choose a slightly different line for the descent and with new snow arriving every day, going to the same area was everything else but boring. On days with good visibility, we could also enjoy the picturesque views of Lake Baikal. To sum up, Mamai proved to be a rich source of powder snow very early in the season. It provided us with big smiles after every ski-touring loop. However, during the descent it is highly recommended to keep your mouth closed due to the light and splashing snow around you.

Elena Borisova