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ADVENTURE IN SIBERIA

A young Kiwi has the adventure of a lifetime reintroducing sled-dogs into a remote part of Russia, by **Josh Gale**

An expedition through Russia's isolated Kamchatka Peninsula led 20-year-old East Auckland explorer Hayden Cockburn to bond with his own pack of eight sled dogs.

Out of thousands of applicants from around the world, Cockburn was selected to become part of the Young Explorers Programme run by the world-acclaimed solo adventurer Mike Horn and funded by Mercedes-Benz.

The Kamchatka Peninsula is known as 'the land of fire and ice' because it is a vast frozen land – nearly twice the size of New Zealand – with active volcanoes and geysers.

The three week expedition, with daily treks of 30km, was made easier for four days when the team of five young international explorers were given their own sled-dog pack to travel with.

Sled-dogs are an important part of the Peninsula's indigenous ethnic cultures. They were traditionally used to travel from village to village and to hunt reindeer.

However, over the last few centuries, as more and more of the Peninsula's population moved to larger towns, the number of Kamchatka sled-dogs has decreased alongside a breakdown of the traditional culture.

Cockburn says this loss of a way of life has led many Kamchakta people to despair and alcoholism.

To revive the culture and promote eco-tourism, a Kamchakta couple has started a sled-dog breeding programme.

When Cockburn and the others first arrived at the couple's breeding centre, the young explorers were apprehensive.

"It was scary walking into the centre at night because we heard all these dogs howling, like real huskies do. They were just going crazy, just barking and yelping at us.

"Then in the morning we walked up to them, let them smell us and they got used to us. In a few hours we were hugging them all and feeding them breakfast."

Cockburn travelled 35km each day for four days with his sled-dog team and learned how to lead them.


"You have to be their leader because they want you to lead them. If you don't they'll go astray and they'll be unhappy."

The dogs at the front of the pack are in charge of the others and if a dog doesn't pull its weight, fights quickly erupt. "So you have to bite their ears to tell them that's wrong and then they realise you're serious and they don't misbehave after that."

Despite the discipline, Cockburn says the dogs are well looked after, with each dog being fed six salmon every day. "That meat they're eating is so lean so it's perfect for their coats and muscles."

He adds: "They'd see us come out of our yurts (shelters) to get them and they would get so excited because they knew we were going to hook them on to the sled and that's what they love doing.

"They're probably the happiest dogs I've ever seen."

To support a Kamchakta sled-dog breeding programme, Cockburn and the other young explorers are starting a website so people from around the world can make a donation or sponsor a sled-dog. The website will be online by the end of March at www.snowdogskamchatka.com. 



DON'T
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Kiwi

Kamchatka

Josh Gale meets a young explorer
mixing it with the world's best

Exertion in subzero conditions don't seem a natural fit for blond and jagged-haired Hayden Cockburn who lives near Auckland's Eastern Bay beach and represented New Zealand in the Laser Radial World Championships. Wearing board shorts and a t-shirt, the 20-year-old marine biology student looks like he'd be happiest carving up a wave rather than boiling snow in a blizzard.

But out of about 10,000 applicants from around the world, Cockburn was selected for the Young Explorers Programme run by world-acclaimed solo adventurer Mike Horn. "He's the most inspirational person I've ever met," says Cockburn. "Everyday he'd give us talks on how he achieved everything he has. I've learned a lot and now I can accomplish more."

From the initial group of 34 young explorers participating in the programme, Cockburn was one of five chosen to accompany Horn on an expedition of their own choosing. Cockburn and his four team members "got out the map" and chose the isolated Kamchatka Peninsula in Russia. Part science expedition, the team of young explorers measured climate conditions and snow quality as well as helping with a project trying to reintroduce sled-dogs, which have an important place in the indigenous culture.

Kamchatka is known as 'the land of fire and ice' because it is a vast frozen land with 127 dormant and 22 active volcanoes. It also has the highest active volcano in Eurasia, which is 1000m taller than Aoraki/Mt Cook. Cockburn and his team spent three weeks on the peninsula often trekking 30km a day through knee-high snow while pulling 120kg supply sleds. "When we first started, I thought three weeks of this would be fine," says Cockburn. "But when we got to the first hill I physically could not pull the sled up. We had to get three or four people pulling and it took a few hours just to get up to the first lip of the mountain."

In the first few days Cockburn experienced the land's extremes in spades. While visiting a thermal area a blizzard swept in and forced the group to make an emergency base camp. "The wind was so strong and the snow pelting on us hurt so much we couldn't stand there," says Cockburn. "We had to dig down to make our base camp and share watches to shake snow off the tents because we were getting buried." Cockburn then made the mistake of taking one glove layer off. "At that time it was -35°C and my hand started to freeze. I didn't know until I couldn't move it at all. I went into a complete panic because if your cells start to die you might have to get it amputated," says Cockburn. After putting on four pairs of gloves and swinging his hands the circulation came back. "I was lucky," he says.

Everything from how to enter a tent and how to prepare to stop, through to what to eat and how to dry clothing overnight requires careful attention in such a hostile environment. "There's a lot more involved than walking," says Cockburn. At night he would strip off his damp clothing and put them in his sleeping bag with him. "The heat from your body pushes the vapour, and humidity out. It forms an ice layer on the inside of your sleeping bag but when you wake up your stuff is dry."

He's glad he still has both hands for surfing and says his exploration of the Kamchatka made him "a lot tougher" and is only the beginning of his adventures. On the cards is walking the Amazon or climbing K2, but Cockburn says for now he wants to keep an open mind.

"I don't really plan much. I just get an idea and I go and do it," he says.