



THE VIEW FROM KUPOL - A vast treeless tundra of rolling hills stretches for thousands of kilometres, and in winter the temperature can drop to minus 60.

From Russia with love

*By Elinor Florence
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Spending two weeks at a remote mining camp in Russia isn't everyone's idea of a holiday - but I felt privileged to be allowed to accompany my husband on one of his frequent trips to the Kupol Gold Mine in Far Eastern Russia.

He works for Orocon Inc. of Vancouver, an engineering/construction company contracted by the mine's owner, Kinross Gold Corporation of Toronto, to assemble a mining operation in this remote region, farther east than Siberia, adjacent to the Arctic Ocean.

The Russians have known about this extremely high deposit of gold for many decades. With funds and technology provided by Kinross, it is now finally possible to extract the gold and a partnership was formed with the Russian government to build the mine.

Currently there are 650 people on site, including 100 Russian women and 70 Chukchis, the aboriginals who live in this largely uninhabited tundra. Most workers are Russian, but there are about 100 skilled tradespeople from Canada, the U.S., Mexico and Portugal.

My husband Heinz Drews is a subcontractor for Orocon who works from his Invermere office, managing the electrical department. He's about three years into this massive four-year project, which began when the first group of Canadian guys were flown into the wilderness by helicopter and dropped,

along with their Arctic tents and survival gear, to begin construction.

Since then massive amounts of equipment have been sent from North America in container ships, up the west coast, through the Bering Sea and around the top of Russia, and then trucked on an ice road for hundreds of kilometres.

That's pretty much the same route we took - flying from Cranbrook to Vancouver to Seattle to Anchorage to Nome, Alaska. From there it was just two hours across the Bering Sea to the tiny Russian seaport of Anadyr, and then another two hours to the mine itself in a Russian aircraft with just 12 seats.

Once we arrived, we found the accommodations almost luxurious. In fact, the Canadians I spoke with said it was the best camp they've ever seen, nicer than anything in Fort McMurray.

The staff enjoys video games and movies, library, pool hall, fully-equipped fitness centre, gymnasium and laundry service. The food is excellent, although the menu suffers from a lack of fresh fruit and vegetables depending on when the "food chopper" arrives.

With gold at \$760 an ounce, the big push is on now towards the grand opening next summer, when Kupol will fire up the assembly line at last and pour that long-awaited first gold bar.

Orocon's construction job will be finished, but Kupol will contribute to the economy and employ hundreds of Russians for years to come.



Our Russian aircraft flew us to the mine from the town of Anadyr.



Canadian-built trailers provide sleeping and recreational facilities for 650 people.



Heinz Drews of Invermere with the huge mill that rotates and crushes the ore.



Left: Kupol, meaning pyramid, is the natural rock formation after which the mine is named. Just below Kupol, heavy equipment is scraping the ore from the surface and stockpiling it so that gold can be extracted. Below, Pioneer Publisher Elinor Florence at the mouth of the underground mine, with the latest Pioneer.

Below left: Wesley Coulson of Invermere, warehouse superintendent; below centre: carpentry foreman Stacy Jobs of Invermere (in white helmet) with a Russian coworker; below right: Colin Mackay of Invermere, construction engineer. The three local men are working seven-and-three - that's seven weeks at the mine, and three weeks back home in Invermere.

Photos by Elinor Florence

