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A Secret Disneyland in the Khakassia Princedom

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The UAZ landrover is inching its way uphill. It looks impassable even on foot, but the “civie tank” moves as if it does not see any obstacles. Once in a while we hit old trunks of fallen trees, and each time we bang our heads on the roof. It is possible to get out of the car without stopping and to walk alongside it for a while, but after a 15 minutes walk the legs get tired and soaked up to the knees. The scenery is unimaginably beautiful: the taiga’s “zharki” (*Asian globeflower*), stately firs, flirtatiously bent birches, and slender threads of taiga’s brooks. The air carries aromas that cannot be smelt anywhere else on Earth. The air here is the direct opposite to the city air and gets dust and car exhaust out of your lungs with your first breath.

We have driven 400 kilometers from Abakan to the Kartoshsko-Ineyskiy preserve of the Republic of Khakassia. The preserve is intended for conserving and replenishing populations of deer, fox, black and wood grouses. This is the place where, during winter, most of the hoofed animals and birds of Khakassia congregate. This is why the Khakassia government decree #146 prohibits almost any kind of human activity here. It forbids:

- hunting,
- trees cutting in grouse mating areas and on the calving grounds,
- use of fertilizers and pesticides,
- collecting zoological samples,
- allotting land for construction (except for the nature conservancy purposes) or for cultivation,
- off road driving and parking,
- camping outside of specially designated areas,
- haying and grazing of cattle,
- construction of buildings and facilities (except for the nature conservancy purposes), of roads (except for forestry and fire prevention purposes), power lines, and other utility infrastructure.

Yes, we are, inadvertently, breaking some rules. We have been driving for the last 12 hours. There is no road, just a carpet of flowers, and not a single bent grass blade. Now we pass

between two birches, now dive into a gully, now we ford, without slowing down, a mountain spring.

What are we doing in the Kartoshsko-Ineyskiy preserve? We are pursuing a lead. We have heard from many sources that here, in the preserve, there have been built a high class resort called “Elk”. Allegedly, the permission to build the resort was issued by the head of the Wildlife and Game Management Directorate for the Republic of Khakassia, Sergei Mashukov, himself. It was issued to Oleg Zimin, the head of the Elk, Inc., and director of the resort. Incidentally, Oleg Zimin is a nephew of Victor Zimin, the deputy director for constructions of the Abakan branch of the Krasnoyarsk Railways. Some say that Victor Zimin actually owns the “Elk” and the resort has been built to curry favors with “useful” people from Khakassia, and from Russia as well, by providing them luxury accommodations and hunting in the pristine taiga. Which explains why the local bureaucracy and law enforcement are getting away with this outrage.

But it is not those details we are after. We want to find and see for ourselves this high class resort.

“Guys, this is all, cannot go any further. You can walk, if you want to.” - says the driver with an apologetic shrug of his shoulders.

No problem, we will walk, and it should not be far, since we have already crossed almost the entire preserve. We put on our gear, take the photo and video cameras, and, accompanied by two hunters, start along a gully. In about an hour, from the first hillock we have climbed on, we see, surprisingly, a herd of horses. How did the horses get here, we wonder. The next surprise is a freshly made dirt road that suddenly has appeared before us and something that looks like a water soaked circle beside it.

“What is that”, I ask one of the guides.

“This is a ‘solonetz’. This is where they put salt to attract elk, deer, or maral. And, look, here this birch has a ladder nailed to it, leading to a hiding place between branches. An animal comes to lick the salt and gets shot from there. This is how the top brass hunts.”

What is there to say? A cool way to hunt in a preserve. But we got to move on, though not before we photograph the hunting setup from all angles. We had barely moved 200 meters away from the “solonetz”, when one of the guides stopped and cocked his head, listening and pointing his finger. “An elk”, came a thought. But the guide said, “A tractor”. Indeed after listening closely I too hear the sound of a tractor laboring.

“Now, guys, - commands the guide - let’s get up as high up as we can, and then put ourselves above the place where it comes from. Then, we are coming down nicely and quietly, without

breaking a single twig. It looks like have we found what you were looking for.” And we start to run up the hill.

We are climbing higher and higher, while I am struggling to breathe and to keep my heart from jumping out. The guide signs us to stop. Now we are moving along the side of the hill, toward the sound of the tractor’s engine, in the guide’s footsteps, looking around and watching our feet. Chatter of the engine becomes louder and we begin our descent. The guide smiles and points to the treetops below us. I see, I see. Some 300 meters further down the slope there are house roofs. Somehow, the lower we get down and the better view of the beautiful large houses, lawns, and arbors opens to us between the trees, the bigger and sillier smiles grow on the faces of my comrades. Perhaps I am wearing a big silly smile too. This is what they call hunting fever. We drop to the ground all the gear we will not need, everything but our cameras. Now we are so close that we can see most of the resort. .

It is not just an ordinary resort: it looks like a place designed to make all your wishes come true. Truly, a nature preserve of a different kind! Not a regular one, where no construction (except for the nature conservancy purposes) and no roads (except for forestry and fire prevention purposes) are permitted, where there can be no power lines, or other utility infrastructure. Here one can have all the heart desires: beautiful houses, each equipped with a satellite dish, saunas, large clubhouses, Jeeps with enormous size wheels and other off road vehicles. Bulldozers are clearing grounds for more construction. This is a dream of any vacationer. Who needs Cyprus or Egypt - they pale in comparison.

Like wood spirits dressed in fatigues, we begin to move stealthily from tree to tree. Fortunately, clicks of our cameras are drowned by a bulldozer. It is dangerous to get any closer, but the hunting fever is stronger than fears. From the 5 meters distance, I and one of my colleagues begin descending to the nearest house. For some reason, the guards and the construction workers are crowded at the opposite side of the settlement, and we now have a chance to film most of the resort. We are just a half a meter away from the house, when two of the guards begin to move in our direction, walking fast and talking between themselves. My colleague throws himself on the ground, face down, but all I could do is to push my back quietly against the outcrop of the hill. There is no time to attempt anything else. In a silly gesture, I press a finger to my lips to warn my colleague, as if he is about to break into a song. Now, we are waiting anxiously for the moment we will be discovered. The guards are getting closer. In another three meters they will see us. Suddenly, they stop and, without breaking their conversation, begin to relieve themselves.

Having finished with the business, they turn around and leave. Could it be that they have not seen us? As soon as they are a safe distance away, we quietly start to leave. To leave this mysterious place where nothing should be disturbed, not even a flower cut, but where facilities have been built for active R&R, including hunting, where bulldozers are crashing through taiga and destroying breeding grounds of animals, some of which are protected species, where hunters roam taiga in Jeeps, mowing down the already diminished animal populations.

There is a federal agency, the Wildlife and Game Management Directorate for the Republic of Khakassia, which is supposed to oversee, maintain, and safeguard inviolability of the preserve. But it seems they don't think this is their responsibility.

Why the Prosecutor Office of Khakassia is not getting involved? - I even don't want to guess. Here is an excerpt from the letter sent by the First Deputy Prosecutor of Khakassia, Makeev, to the Office of Prosecutor General of the Russian Federation: "I am informing you hereby that M.V. Afanasyev's complaint concerning alleged law breaking by the Khakassia Wildlife and Game Management Directorate addressed to the Office of Prosecutor General of the Russian Federation has been investigated. The arguments put forward in the complaint had been investigated repeatedly in the past, and once again have been found ungrounded."

I used to wonder why don't they create an independent commission, composed from, say, representatives of the Wildlife Department of the federal Ministry of Agriculture, from scientists of the All-Russia Research Institute of the Academy of Agriculture, from the Khakassia government representatives, from representatives of the Office of the Prosecutor General (since the local prosecutors prefer not to see the obvious)? Why don't they put under scrutiny activities of the Khakassia Wildlife Directorate?

I know for a fact that the Khakassia government is interested in having the Wildlife and Game Management Directorate investigated, and that honest game wardens, and many other people who in one way or another have had an encounter with this outrage, want the investigation too. Let the commission check the facts, visit the place we have visited. Scientists have completed a study on populations and reproductive rates of wild animals of Khakassia. All the facts are known.

But those who consider themselves shadow rulers of Khakassia are dead against the investigation.

And, lastly, in what I am about to say, there is no over dramatization or self-promotion, nothing but appreciation of the basic facts of life in Khakassia. If, in the near future, I am imprisoned on drug charges or for some other crimes, this would mean that in the battle with the shadow princes of Khakassia the victory was not ours.¹

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¹ Mikhail Afanasiev has been criminally prosecuted for “libel”, fined; in December 2004 spent 2 days in detention. Reportedly, he is facing now another libel trial.