



Trip to a heavenly place of Arshan

REPORT BY V. KOROTKORUCHKO

The route from Irkutsk to Arshan has been extremely popular with holiday-makers in recent years. Whole families come here for a week and more or only for a weekend, for the distance is only 220 km

We start our journey early in the morning in order to get through the first and most difficult part of the trip from Irkutsk to the Kultuk village taking advantage of a chilly morning air. The so-called Kultuk road is one of the most arduous and perilous roads, but it is very beautiful in all seasons. However, only passengers can admire the taiga amenities. The driver has to manage the variable relief of the mountain road, which seems extremely narrow and, what is more, has not only smooth, but also almost 180-degree turns. Each of such turns might conceal the danger of meeting with an absent-minded driver attentively counting the number of cones on the top a cedar.

The 98 km-long journey to Kultuk usually takes one and a half or two hours; it includes a necessary stop at a spring with ice-cold water. The last ten kilometers of a long descent lead to a lacet, from which one can observe a grand panorama of the Baikal southern borderline. Here on the fish market, natives offer fresh, corned, dried, and smoked omuls to starving travellers. Depending on the season, one can also find here taiga delicacies, such as berries, mushrooms, cedar nuts...

After Kultuk the road is completely different: it is wider and straighter, and not similar to that to Baikal at all. The sun is hot when our cars drive into the prolific Tunkin valley showing all diversity of Siberian nature: steppes, forests, mountains, rivers, and lakes. And all this magnificence delights city dwellers.

The Tunkin valley is a part of the Baikal rift zone located on the southwest of the Buryat Republic; it is 200 km long and 20-35 km wide. On the north the valley is fenced, as if by watchtowers, by the Tunkin bald mountain tops with

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distinct alpine shapes (sometimes they are even called the "Tunkin Alps"). On the south the valley is protected by less steep slopes of the Khamar-Daban ridge. On the west the huge hollow is shielded by a great Munku-Sardyk ("ever-white peak") mountain range, whose main (eastern) peak is 3492 meters high, which is the absolute record height in Eastern Sayan.

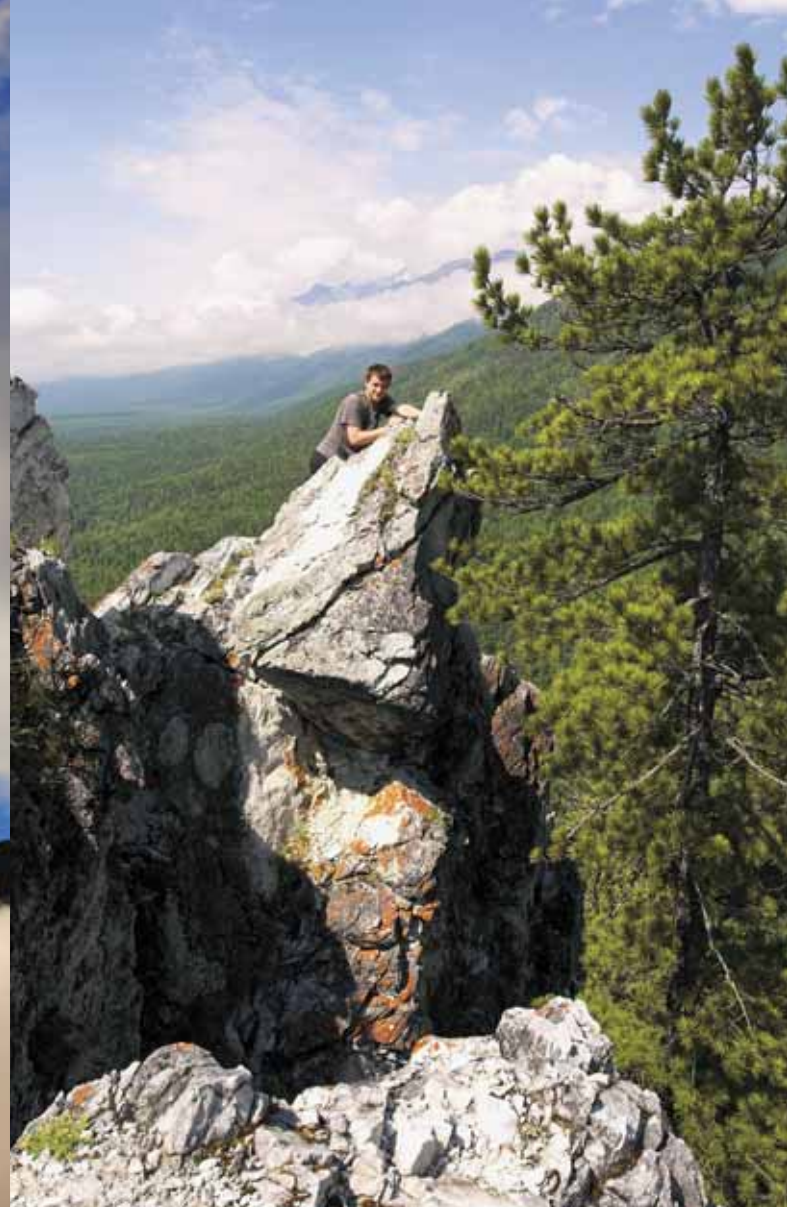
That is why in the short period between the end of April and beginning of May there are a lot of climbers at the bottom of Munku-Sardyk, who come here, like pilgrims, from all neighboring regions and even from Europe. But we are not going to Munku-Sardyk today: we are having a "day off trip". So we turn off the main road much earlier and, passing the bridge across the Irkut River flowing through the entire valley from west to east, we find ourselves in a heavenly place (for those who are able to appreciate it) named Arshan.

Arshan is the name used by inhabitants for a spring. There are a lot of mineral springs in the valley; the most significant are called Nilova Pustyn, Zhemchug (translated as Pearls), Arshan and, apart, Shumak, a unique phenomenon of nature behind the northern slope of Tunkin Rocks. Shumak has numerous outlets of mineral waters with healing properties. The shortest way to the springs for those who wish to heal themselves is a walk over the Shumak pass, naturally with a rucksack, or on horseback. There are helicopters, of course, if you are ready to pay much money. I have been there many times, and I am convinced that a person who



reached Shumak on his own cannot be considered an ill person! The way is very long and hard, and the pass itself is more than 2000 meters high...

But today we are in Arshan. It is a balneoclimatic mountain health resort located at a height of 900 m above sea level. Its mineral waters belonging to the class of cold carbonaceous chalybeate hydrocarbonate-calcium-magnesium waters (similar to the Kislovodsk mineral water called Narzan) are used to treat diseases of the gastrointestinal tract and liver, metabolic disturbances and cardiovascular system diseases, and functional neuroses. The sanatorium called



“Sayany”, well equipped and with a large swimming pool, which is not at all common for such an out-of-the-way place, is used for the treatment.

For some people the Arshan resort gives hope for healing, and for other it is an opportunity to have a nice holiday in a region of still animate nature. We shall not speak about “passive” rest, which means lying on stony beaches of the Kyngarga river or night revelries to the accompaniment of roaring stereo systems, although this takes place. We like active rest! Maybe we would sunbathe a little too, but we don’t have enough time for this. Instead, we have lots of exciting things in store for such activists as we are. We can warm up with a walk over the Kyngarga river-bed, gradually climbing higher and higher, up to the first waterfall. This is the start and finish point of many mountaineering and mountain climbing routes. Those who wish and have enough strength can follow one of these routes and



◀ Kyngarga river gorge

◀ In the resort neighborhood there are a lot of such mushrooms in a good season!

Love peak is the most accessible ▲ peak for holiday-makers, although it takes some effort to reach its top

▶ Archers’ contests are the highlight of the Buryat national festival called Surharban





walk through a picturesque gorge where a roaring and foaming river rushes over its numerous rapids.

Having walked 21 km of a mountain path, you can reach the Arshan pass, which opens ways to the very heart of Eastern Sayan. But this trip takes at least a week, so it is not for us again. Here are two “local” peaks — the Arshan peak and Love peak. The former is a serious trial, and the latter is the very thing we want (though it also takes some effort). When we come here for a long time, we climb the Love peak as a training before serious mountaineering, like climbing my favorite Three-Headed Alp. Or we can just ascend 150-200 meters of the path up to the first rocks, face the valley and feel the soul thrill ...

Those who do not wish to sweat on the mountain path, can gather mushrooms and berries; you don't have to go too far into the forest for this. One can also make a tour to the Arshan *datsan*, i. e. a Buddhist temple. Unfortunately, in the temple itself shooting is prohibited. It was built not long ago, but already has its numerous parish and is very popular with the laymen, who are slowly moving towards the two holy mortars, thoughtfully revolving their praying drums.

When you leave Arshan at the end of the second day, do not forget to take some mineral water home. We do this and, according to an old Buryat custom, we tie a ribbon to a tree in the Sacred Grove, where the life-giving liquid goes out to the surface.

As we approach the city, we stop at the first traffic lights and warily breathe in the dubious city air, pressed on both sides by roaring cars. We would like to come back...



Arshan *datsan* — a Buddhist temple



Trees in the Sacred Grove near the spring ►

◀ Holy mortars of the Arshan *datsan*