



## Going for gold

The Russian photojournalist Elena Chernyshova documented the life and work at this Siberian gold mine, which is more space station than Gulag.

Calling the Kupol gold mine 'remote' is a bit of an understatement, given that it's at the far end of Eastern Siberia, deep in the Russian district of Chukotka.

For a large part of the year it's only accessible by air. Between November and January however, subzero temperatures allow for a 360 km ice road across the snow, leading to the Port of Pevek. During this time 2000 trucks travel the road delivering supplies that have to be ordered two years in advance.

The rich gold mine (last year alone it yielded 15,600 kg of gold and 748,427 kg of silver) is testament to Siberia's extraordinary wealth of resources. After South Africa, it's thought to have the biggest gold reserves in the world, but is also still rich in coal, oil and other minerals, as the low temperatures and lack of infrastructure makes the region difficult to exploit.

Before the Canadian company Kinross began mining Kupol in 2005, these gold supplies were worked by inmates of Stalinist prison camps in the 30s, but things have come a long way since then.

'It feels like being on the set of a science fiction film like *The Fifth Element*,' says up and coming photojournalist Elena

'It feels like being on the set for a science fiction film like the fifth element or like being in the future.'

Chernyshova, who was commissioned by *National Geographic Russia* to document day-to-day life at the mine.

The former architect only turned pro a few years ago after becoming fascinated with photography during a three-month cycle tour through Eurasia.

On her return she won the Emerging Talent award at the Nikon Photo Contest for images taken during this trip, which spurred her on to pursue photography professionally. A grant from the Lagardère Foundation allowed her to realise a project on Norilsk, an industrial city in Krasnoyarsk Krai, Siberia. This work

**LEFT:** Kupol is a very rich gold mine with remaining reserves estimated to be 60,000kg gold and 750,000kg of silver. D800, AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f2.8G ED, ISO 2000, 1/40 (Q) f/4

**RIGHT:** A worker wearing protective gear to safeguard against chemicals, such as cyanide, which is used to extract gold from the ore. D800, AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f2.8G ED, ISO 1600, 1/30 (Q) f/2.8





won her a prize in the daily life category of the World Press Awards and was published in several *National Geographic* editions.

Like many of the gold mine's 1200 employees, she had to take an eight hour flight from Moscow to Magadan and then board a small aircraft for another two-hour flight to reach the mine. People come from all over the world to work here – many from Russia, but there are also Canadians, Germans and Chileans, with about 15 per cent of staff being female.

It's not how you'd envisage a Siberian gold mine to be. In all areas, cutting edge technologies are used, such as remotely operated drills which work the deepest recesses of the mine to minimise risk for workers. The living quarters are also ultramodern with a hydro-culture greenhouse, a gym, sports hall, pool tables, a video library and music and prayer rooms. A heated 900 metre tunnel leads workers to the mine in winter when temperatures can drop down to -50°C.

Elena says, 'I was very impressed with the organisation. It's clear that a lot of thought has gone into providing the miners with the best of everything, from where they sleep to what they eat – which was healthy and fresh. It really helped to create a good working atmosphere – everybody was trying to help each other, nobody complained and everybody was grateful for their jobs.'

This of course was only beneficial to the assignment. 'Everybody was friendly and happy to be photographed,' she says. 'I always take time to make a connection with the people I photograph first and try

**RIGHT:** Workers passing the time after a 12-hour working day. Most stay for periods of two months, followed by two months off. D800, AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f2.8G ED, ISO 1600, 1/80 (Q) f/4.5

'Foxes and wolverines just walk around the station and why not – it's their territory and we're the guests here.'

to understand their character. If you show real interest and curiosity in their lives, people usually open up and don't mind being photographed. I never take photos of people against their will, but if somebody is just a bit shy, I explain what I am doing and why I think it's important to show the kind of activity I'm trying to photograph. They usually agree to be photographed and are often glad they did afterwards.'

Although staff rarely go outside, Elena also captured the mine's surrounding areas, often by helicopter, including wildlife. The Northern Lights, and the local reindeer herders who are supported by Kinross. She says, 'What surprised me was the number of animals we saw. Foxes and wolverines just walked around the station and why not – it's their territory and we're the guests here.'

Elena's mother grew up in the Arctic Circle and the stories she told to Elena sparked her interest in the area. The living conditions are incredibly harsh,' she says. 'It's quite unnatural for humans to be here, but what fascinates me is how people adapt in such isolation. They've created an infrastructure, good working and living conditions and actually, a really pleasant environment. It was a great opportunity to study humans and how they behave in such an adverse habitat. For me that's what photojournalism is all about.' ◀

To see more of Elena's work, visit [www.elena-chernyshova.com](http://www.elena-chernyshova.com)



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**TOP:** The workers grow their own vegetables. D800, AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f2.8G ED, ISO 640, 1/200 (Q) f/5.6

**ABOVE:** As well as gold veins, there are also large silver deposits in Kupol. D800, AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f2.8G ED, ISO 1600, 1/640 (Q) f/2.8

**RIGHT:** The mine provides leisure facilities, although alcohol is banned. D800, AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f2.8G ED, ISO 1600, 1/20 (Q) f/6.3





## Making it happen

I always try to first figure out what I want to show and absorb the atmosphere. I then look for the key visual elements that will tell the story best. Often these are the particularities of a place, the connections and activities, which I will try and capture.

I always try to almost be invisible, so that people can forget that I am there. For me it's important that you don't feel the presence of the photographer in the images.

'Of course you also need the right equipment. I often work in temperatures as low as -45°C and my D800 always functions perfectly, even when taking photos out of an open window of a

'Ruthless editing is hard, but crucial to pull a project all together.'

helicopter – this really impresses me a lot.

'Of course the batteries lose power quicker in the cold, but if I put them into my coat to warm up, I can use them again, using three sets in rotation. I often joke that my camera is more cold resistant than I am. Even changing lenses is fine, as long as no snow blows into the camera. Nikon equipment is very good for these conditions.

'I like how the D800 performs in dark conditions. The focus points work very well even in poor light and the quality at high sensitivities is great. As I often photograph in places where I can't use a tripod and don't use flash, a camera's low-light performance is very important to me.

'And finally it's skilful editing that brings the project to life. I try to not look at the images for as long as possible after I finish a project – two weeks or more if I can –



**LEFT:** The mine's living quarters and the tunnel leading to the mine in the background, shot from a helicopter. D800, AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f2.8G ED, ISO 125, 1/320 Qf/8

**ABOVE:** For most of the year Kupol can only be accessed by air. D800, AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f2.8G ED, ISO 400, 1/800 Qf/10

**RIGHT:** The mine's gym. D800, AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f2.8G ED, ISO 1250, 1/200 Qf/2.8



so I can come back to them with fresh eyes. Emotional links to photos – usually because of what happened when you took them – can skew your view. It's best to distance yourself so you can be more objective and select the strongest images.

'When it comes to creating the story, I decide which elements are important and

select the shots that give the necessary information. It's important to avoid repetition, though, so if I have a few strong pictures that show the same thing, I often only choose one and add others that might be less artistic, but show an important part of the feature.

'Ruthless editing is hard, but crucial to pull a project together.'



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**CLIENTS:**  
Magazines and newspapers, including *National Geographic Russia*, *Le Monde* and *News week Russia*

**WHY NIKON?**  
When I started out in photography I looked at a lot of documentary photography projects and all the ones, where I really loved the colours had been taken on Nikons. For me this was a very strong point and why I chose Nikon.

**WHAT'S IN THE BAG?**  
I work with the D800. The AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f/2.8G ED is my working lens, but I also love the AF-S NIKKOR 50mm f/1.4G, for its shallow depth of field and great bokeh. I also work with a AF-S NIKKOR 16-35mm f/4G ED VR for wide shots.

**NEXT PIECE OF EQUIPMENT?**  
I am looking to buy the AF-S NIKKOR 35mm f/1.4G, because its quality is very impressive.

### KIT BAG



Nikon D800,



AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f2.8G ED



AF-S NIKKOR 16-35mm f/4G ED



AF-S NIKKOR 50mm f/1.4G