

**PERCEPTIONS OF TOURISM AMONG THE OROCHON-EVENK  
IN TOWNS, VILLAGES AND FORESTS,  
SOUTHERN YAKUTIA AND NEIGHBOURING AMUR REGION<sup>1</sup>**

© by S. GABYSHEV co-written with A. Lavrillier

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**The communities and authorities concerned do require a prior agreement before any visit, and are strictly opposed to all forms of wild tourism, or improvised and unexpected visits. Measures will be taken in case of non-respect of these rules.**

## **Introduction**

In a previous study for POLARIS made by Lavrillier in 2012, it was attested that there is no tourism among the Evenk people of Southern Yakutia and Northern Amur region, while this indigenous people is rich in terms of cultural and natural heritage.

The aim of this field trip was to assess the views of various socio-economic sub-groups of Evenk peoples in these regions about tourism and possible ways to develop activities from indigenous points of view.

## **Presentation of the fields of research**

The Evenk are the biggest of the so-called minority peoples of Yakutia and live also in neighbouring regions such as the Amur region. Nowadays, the Evenk of Yakutia and the Amur region belong to the same cultural and linguistic sub-group - the Orochen-Evenk. The Evenk of this group are traditionally reindeer herders and hunters. They were divided by the frontier in 1935 when Yakutia lost a big part of its territory.

These historical and cultural features determined the choice to work in the following villages and regions. In addition, in order to work out a comprehensive assessment on Evenk views about tourism, it was decided to work among the Evenk of the nomadic area, villages and towns of Southern Yakutia and the close-by Northern Amur region. Thinking about the feasibility of a potential tourism development among Orochen-Evenk, I decided to work among groups living along the main railway (Baikal-Amur).

Beyond the limits of Yakutia, in the Amur region, there are 5 Evenk villages, but I decided to work in 3 of them: Pervomaiskoe, Urkima and Ust-Nyukzha. These villages are of interest for several reasons. They are along the railway, with an important Evenk population, and present various situations in term of closeness to the main towns, and in terms of relationship with nomadic Evenk population. In addition, I worked in the main town Tynda. In Southern Yakutia, I decided to work in one Evenk village – Iengra, which has an important link with nomadic reindeer herders and one town, Nerungri, close to

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each other and where Evenk language and culture are well safeguarded.

As to methodology, I gathered interviews and lead open-discussions (partly recorded) mostly in Evenk language among reindeer herders, villages and townspeople. Globally, the questions and discussion themes were about their way of life and its relation to cultural and natural heritage; what do they think about tourism and how would they implement such activities at home.

## **I - Evenk of Towns and Tourism**

Nerungri, located in Southern Yakutia, was founded in the 1970's both as a stop on the main railway and for coal mining purposes. The town was built on the best Evenk reindeer herders' pastures. Today it counts 57 791 inhabitants, a university and a park for leisure, as well as a ski slope, small museum, several schools, including one for indigenous youngsters. At the edge of the town, there is a giant open coal pit as well as many surrounding gold and other precious metal mines. The town and its airport are located in the middle of a tremendous taiga forest. About one hour from this town there is an Evenk village called Iengra. The population of Nerungri is mainly composed of Russian and Slavic individuals, together with a growing Yakut population and a small minority of Evenk.

In the neighbouring Amur region, Tynda counts 33 450 inhabitants. It is the main town on the BAM (Baikal Amur Railway). This railway links central Russia to the Far East. The railway and the many local gold and titan mines support most of the town's economy. There is a small museum, a small leisure park, schools, and kindergardens, as well as shopping centres. The population counts mainly Russian and Slavic peoples with very few Evenk from the local intelligentsia. The town is surrounded by taiga forest. Twenty minutes by car from Tynda there is an Evenk village with a big majority of Russians.

As shown in the following examples, the points of view of Nerungri and Tynda interviewed peoples (both Evenk and Russian) are skeptic as to the feasibility of tourism development, while recognizing that there would be a lot to show to tourists, in particular as far as extreme tourism is concerned. The Russian emphasize natural heritage, while the Evenk are divided in 2 opposed groups regarding the attraction of cultural heritage. The first group considers that neither the nomadic way of life, nor Evenk villages are likely to attract tourists. The second group considers that the nomadic way of life could attract tourists. All agree on the lack of attraction of Evenk villages for tourists. They all stress also the lack of investment and services usually expected by tourists.

One of the interviewed persons - a teacher of Evenk language in the local indigenous school: *"I don't believe that tourism is possible here. Who will come to us? We have nothing to show to crowds of tourists. When we receive guests to our school, we show them traditional dances and cultural features, but mass tourists won't come for that"*

Another example is reflected by a Russian engineer: *"In principle, it would be possible to organize tourism. Here, there are things to be shown to tourists like rivers, mountains, but tourism is a complex thing to organize, it's a work a several generations. Indeed, here climate is one problem (European tourists would adapt with difficulty to our cold weather). The conditions for mass tourism are not here, but only for extreme tourists, alpinists and so far. Most of the Russian tourists travel for leisure purposes to Spain, and other warm countries and expect real services. If we look at the example of China, they have been receiving Russian tourists for a long time and offer expected services,*

*like in Spain, Greece etc. Here there are no services for mass tourism for the moment. Here we receive only a few extreme tourists from Asian countries (Japan, China), but this is not enough for maintaining a real business. Nevertheless, there is a lot to show here to tourists from the natural environment (berries, mushrooms, mountains, the forest). But if you are not born in the North, you cannot understand it and be attracted by it.”*

An Evenk with a specific profile of townspeople with a nomadic experience offers a counter example: *“At the end of the 1990s some tourists came here, travelling along the rivers, climbing mountains, etc. It is possible to organize several trails by using various means of transport (bark, train, car) for touristic itineraries in the forest here. There are a lot of beautiful natural places here. In principle, it would be definitely possible to organize this”,* he told showing on a map the places he practiced himself. *“Tourists could practice fishing, extreme trails on mountains, rivers and so far. Regarding the Evenk villages, it is not that easy, since many remote villages are very difficult to reach while others have nothing in common with the traditional nomadic culture of the Evenk: that means that there is nothing to show to tourists. In the villages, I cannot see what might be of interest to tourists. Life conditions are difficult there. Tourists won’t be interested. Among Russian tourists, only a few would be interested in visiting our places. Foreign tourists might take an interest in coming to Evenk places, but one needs to build up specific tourist bases for that and to set up a strong organization of activities. In the forest, however, it is not so easy to offer regular timing of lunch and activities, because nature is laying down the law. In addition, security is an issue in the forest. A lot of investments need to be made to develop tourism here. Furthermore, tourism would require full time commitment from nomads, so how could Evenk nomads match these two professional activities?”*



Picture 1 & 2 (© S. Gabyshev, 2015): towns of Neryungri and Tynda

## II - The Evenk of Villages and Tourism

From the 4 Evenk villages visited during the mission, Pervomaiskoe, Urkima, Ust-Njukzha and Iengra, we can define 3 types in relation to the challenge of tourism development:

- 1) Village at the edge of a big town and which does not practice anymore the traditional way of life of the Evenk
- 2) Village relatively close to a big town and which safeguarded the traditional way of life of the Evenk
- 3) Village far from a big town and which safeguarded the traditional way of life of the Evenk

The analysis of the interviews shows that each type of village corresponds to a specific point of view about tourism.

### 1) Village at the edge of a big town and which does not practice anymore the traditional way of life of the Evenk

Among the first type, there is Pervomaiskoe. This village counts 700 inhabitants with a majority of Russians. Situated 10 kilometers from the main town, there is one school-kindergarten, 2 small shops, wooden houses and a small leisure area for children in the middle of the forest. Heating is provided by a coal-fired plant in the village and in all houses there is tap water. The school was developed with space for a traditional sewing shop, etc. At around 30 minutes from the village, in the forest, there is a touristic centre called "The Evenk Village". This touristic base was built in 2010-2011 thanks to 27 millions of rubles within the framework of the Federal plan of Economic Development till 2020. It was designed to support the development of all types of economic activities, including tourism. Situated in the middle of the forest close to a river, this center counts wooden houses, Evenk traditional constructions, a conference room with a small ethnic museum, sauna and more. Even if some Evenk were paid for the construction of the traditional tents', storage houses' etc., all employees of the center are Russians.

The opinion of the Evenk villagers about this touristic center created by the State is diversified regarding its potential for touristic development. Some consider this place good for tourism development, but its management is badly organised. Others consider that local places are not attractive for tourists.

An Evenk herder working at the centre, explains: *"They tried to keep reindeer in that center and I worked as herder there. There were a lot of tourists from the local town, but these tourists wanted to eat reindeer meat. It is impossible since the herd was too small. The reindeer died of scarcity because of the lack of lichen around the centre. I tried to keep reindeer, but this is impossible close to the town."*

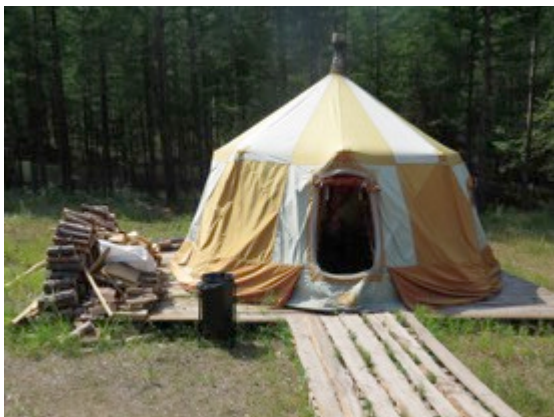
An Evenk teacher, explains: *"This center is really beautiful, but it is a pity that there are no reindeer there and no Evenk workers. The place is a bit small, as well as the hotel. It is close to a small clean river, which is good. The enclosure of reindeer was built in the wrong place. Nevertheless, the stage, dance room, museum and hotel are very beautiful. In fact, there are almost no tourists coming there. Nonetheless, it is a good place for Evenk meeting. With the Evenk of the region we regularly organise meetings and festivals there (regional Evenk meetings, Chinese-Russian Evenk meetings, seminars on traditional handicrafts). We already performed ritual offerings to the local traditional constructions and to nature, consequently this place is loaded by spirits. In addition, here we could both produce and sell souvenirs to tourists."*

In such villages, most Evenk do not consider that tourism can be developed at their place, because “*we have nothing to attract tourists, neither Evenk traditional culture, nor beautiful wild nature*”.

According to the local Evenk, the population has lost Evenk culture, language and interest in it as well. I think that these Evenk don't believe in tourism development since they lose hope in life because of the difficult economic conditions. They could develop tourism, but they are not sure whether it is of interest.



Pictures 3 & 4 (© S. Gabyshev, 2015): Village Pervomaiskoe – the house of culture; private vegetable garden





Pictures 5, 6, 7 © S. Gabyshev, 2015: “The Evenk village” – tent for guests; seminar and dance room during an Evenk handicraft meeting; traditional conical tent with ritual offerings.

## **2) Village relatively close to a big town and which safeguarded the traditional way of life of the Evenk**

Among this type of village, there is Iengra, situated in the forest. It counts 1 006 inhabitants, most of which are Evenk. At 1 hour by car from the main town, it is really accessible. The village has a modern ethno-cultural centre with a museum, a music school, an important boarding school complex and a space for children outside. Heating is provided by a coal-fired plant, situated in the center of the village and in all houses there is tap water. In the village surroundings one can find many small gold mines. Close to the village, there are many nomadic camps of reindeer herders.

All interviewed persons (some examples here below) are enthusiastic about the idea of tourism development and affirm that the natural and cultural heritage of the Evenk is of interest to tourists.

A villager with a nomadic experience – *“Tourism is possible, even with a simple car for camping and fishing, wealth of flora and fauna”.*

An Evenk teacher – *“Tourism is really possible and necessary by using cultural heritage - reindeer herding - as a way of life. Reindeer herding can benefit from this new way of economy, but one needs to write projects for showing tourists only the nice aspects. Tourism brings good income. We need to train our youth and pay for their studies, and train them in English. Tourism would help to safeguard language and culture. Dances and rituals practiced in tourism maintain traditions for the youth. This is the same principle for our festivals when the youth can practice their culture and it can be the same for tourism”*

An Evenk fireman – *“Tourists will be interested in sharing the way of life of the Evenk, working with wood fires, sharing nomadic activities (hunting, fishing), listening to the storytelling of nomads. This extreme way of life is bound to be of interest for tourists. For instance, my reindeer herders relatives are staying close to the village. They could*

*be involved in tourism. We don't need any investment or base construction, They could come here, make arrangements with tourists and that's it. European tourists would like it. Here there is various game, fishing our nice landscape. Our village is also beautiful surrounded by nature with our mountain, which is a good visit card"*

An Evenk former geologist – *"Some Evenk have tried to develop tourism and built up a base here in the forest. There is a trail to our main mountain. It is possible to ride reindeer, gather berries and mushrooms, to organise biological trails with explanations about the flora. It would be possible to gather medicinal plants. Unfortunately, this base burned out. In principle, tourists could come to the nomads in the forest and share their life, to fish and hunt"*.

An Evenk veterinarian – *"Tourism would be a really good thing. Here, it is possible to reach nomadic camps even by car. People know the roads. The tourists could arrive in the camp and share the way of life of the Evenk. Tourists could also visit the village and perform rituals or even go to the nomadic forest. Our traditional way of life is a real and unique treasure. Here, there is everything: we have reindeer, good people, we know our language, and, most of all, entire families are living in the forest"*.

As we can see thanks to these examples, these Evenk consider that both village and nomadic camps are of interest for tourists.





Pictures 8 - 11 (© S. Gabyshev, 2015): lengra – the ethno-cultural center; the main mountain; berries gathering as summer economic activity of the children; street of the village.

### 3) Village far from a big town and which safeguarded the traditional way of life of the Evenk

The villages of this type are located several hours from the main town by different means of transports (train, car, boat). Around those villages, far away in the forest, there are many reindeer herding camps and good preservation of traditional economics. In both villages, heating is provided by individual wood-burning stoves. Water is brought to each house by a tanker. Both villages are surrounded by beautiful mountains and big rivers.

Urkima (255 inhabitants) is one of those villages with a majority of Evenk. It is a small village of wooden houses in open space amidst the forest. There is a school, a kindergarten and a very small space for cultural events for children outside. Over the last 5 years, several small mines have been extracting gold around the village.

Ust-Njukzha counts 649 inhabitants with 414 Evenk, most of which are nomadic herders. The village consists of wooden houses with some shops in the centre, a small space for children games, a big school complex with a small museum and a small dancing hall, as well as a medical point.

Most villagers, be they Russian or Evenk, consider that tourism is potentially a good thing for the local population: most only in the village, only a few would do so in the camps camp. The interviewed are identifying several possible activities. The arguments are different, as shown in the extracts of the interviews here below.

An Evenk, former worker at the weather station - *“In our village, there is a good natural and cultural potential for tourism, but before that it is necessary to create a business plan. There are a lot of possible activities in the village, like skiing on the water, skiing on snow, travels by boat along the river, working groups for meeting the elders ; skin work, sewing, sewing with pearls, horse riding, fishing.”*

An Evenk unemployed housewife - *“Tourism would be very needed for the villagers, most of which are unemployed and have to cope with a lack of income. Tourists could*

*practice skin work and learn traditional sewing in the village. Villagers could sell their Evenk souvenirs to tourists. We have a lot of skilled people here.”*

An Russian railway worker and local, small businessman working with reindeer herders (he has some reindeer herded by local Evenk): – *“Of course, we could easily open tourism here without a lot of preparation. European tourists do not need a lot of infrastructure, exoticism is enough for them. We could organise things by joining the Russians’ and Evenks’ efforts and means of transport for developing tourism among reindeer herders.”*

An Evenk doctor – *“Tourism is impossible to organize in a simple way. It is necessary to build up a touristic base for that, with a medical point, organized transport, restaurants, warm houses, fresh food, fridges, European toilets, etc. Of course we would have a lot to show as far as our natural and cultural heritage is concerned, like rock paintings or ritual offerings for instance, as well as reindeer herding camps, but without the creation of a touristic base - no hope! And for that we need funding, but who will fund such project? In the past, there were some attempts to search for funding for tourism. Local administration needs sponsoring for tourism development in our village.”*

Most interviewed think that it would be possible to start without any specific preparation, while the others stress the absolute necessity to first establish a business plan and to find sponsors.



Pictures 12 & 13 (© S. Gabyshev, 2015): Ust-Nyukzha – Big river by which one can reach the village; elders during reindeer and elk skin treatment activity in their garden.



Pictures 14 & 15 (© S. Gabyshev, 2015): Urkima – work during the expedition with villagers; some Evenk are haying within the village for their cow.

## II - Evenk of nomadic forest and tourism

In southern Yakutia and the Amur region, the Orochon-Evenk traditional type of reindeer herding (with hunting as a subsistence economy) is very well safeguarded and most nomadic camps count entire families (i.e. not only men, as among many herding camps in other regions). Evenk language and traditions are practiced. In this type of reindeer herding, families move from one camp to another very often and almost exclusively by reindeer. They perform some of their travels by snowmobile for purchasing food and goods in the village.

We can synthesise the point of view of the nomads as follows: They immediately think about the kind of activities they could propose to tourists and seem ready to start right now. They stress the necessity of additional income for herders struggling with pay which must be equally shared. They consider their nomadic life as attractive for tourists almost just as it is, without any additional constructions. Only few herders underline the need of external help for business organisation and finding tourists. All of them want to have to deal with as few intermediary agencies or business men as possible.

An Evenk reindeer herder – *“Of course here there is a good natural and cultural potential for tourism. Most Russian tourists won’t ever come to see us (they are not interested in our culture), but foreigners like EU citizens or the Chinese would do so, I am certain. Of course our camps are too far away for bringing tourists there in a short time, but with a good promise of income, herders could bring reindeer to a camp close to the village for a short period. It is essential that touristic activities are organised by the herders themselves, with as little mediation by intermediary agencies as possible. And in the case of collective work, it is crucial that income is shared equally. For us herders, tourism should be a seasonal activity, once or twice a year, generating additional income. Tourism is possible only where the Evenk traditions are safeguarded ».*

An Evenk reindeer herders – *“Of course I agree to deal with tourism if we are controlling it. We could propose tours by reindeer, hunting or fishing. Tourists could be with the reindeer and take pictures. For instance, I have a wooden base in the forest, where I spend some time when I nomadise, reindeer with warm houses, sauna and so far. In addition, perhaps some extreme tourists could agree to sleep in the tissue tent like we do in winter, or to stay in the forest with us for a month to share our life – I could host tourists there. Reindeer herders of course would agree to manage tourism in such a way. But we need to find people for business organisation, finding funds first and then clients. I would agree immediately, well we are continuously suffering from our lack of money.”*

An Evenk reindeer herder – *“By gathering the efforts of several herding families, we could bring tourists to the camp. Working like this, we could earn additional income, which is absolutely necessary. Tourists could share our activities and culture, drink Evenk tea with reindeer milk, admire the baby reindeer, help in lighting smoke fires for reindeer, preparing wood preparation or with herding tasks. They could gather berries, mushrooms. We could re-find / rediscover reuse our skills in working with birch bark (for box and roof construction). The most important is to start.”*

An Evenk reindeer herder – *“We could host tourists and show them reindeer, nature, share our life, but it depends on the persons the tourists are – good or bad people. By the way, our relatives – villagers – visit us as tourists looking for leisure in the natural environment. Herders do need money nowadays, are struggling to survive nowadays”*



Pictures 16 & 17 (© S. Gabyshev, 2015): Taiga – Reindeer herders come close to the village for goods and food purchasing; riding reindeer in the summer.

## Conclusion

We can see that most townspeople are highly sceptic as to the possibilities of developing local tourism and don't see any touristic interest in Evenk nomadic culture. In contrast, nomadic reindeer herders consider their traditional way of life as almost

ready to serve for tourism development and have precise views of what kind of touristic activities to propose immediately. Villagers are somewhere in the middle. In the villages that have lost close ties with nomadic reindeer herding, people don't see any interest for tourists in their village. Some villagers only consider the place of the village as potentially attractive for tourists.

All Orochen-Evenk met during this expedition perceive tourism development as a possible solution to earn additional income and insist on the economic problems of both villagers (with 60-80% of unemployment people, survival being based on the vegetable garden, berries and mushroom gathering) and reindeer herders (small income only and hunting). In some villages, the municipality or mayor is trying to find funding for tourism development by submitting projects to federal and regional calls (but to no avail for the time being). All nomads consider that should tourism develop in their area, they'd have to be in charge of it.

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