

Trip of a Lifetime **Kamchatka, Russia**

Chasing Rainbows in the Wild, Wild East

By Michael Hamilton



PHOTO BY JIM KLUG

This is a tale of two wilderness rivers, the Ozernaya and the Two Yurt. They flow through the vast uninhabited wild tracks along the 1,000-mile-long mountainous spine of Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula in a remote region called the Russian Far East, which extends from eastern Siberia to the Pacific Ocean. The spring-fed Ozernaya River and the lake-fed Dvukhyurtochnaya River, commonly called the Two Yurt, hold some of

the largest surface-feeding wild rainbows on earth. The Ozernaya also teems with incalculable numbers of migrating Pacific salmon, sea-run char, Dolly Varden, and the largest grayling in the world, while the Two Yurt can see runs of up to 300,000 sockeye annually. In partnership with Utgard Expeditions, a Russian company, Colorado-based The Best of Kamchatka agent/outfitter has exclusive rights for booking anglers for the two rivers.

Geographically isolated for centuries, the Ozernaya and Two Yurt Rivers appear frozen in time and are the last places left on our planet where entire cold-water watersheds flow to the ocean unimpeded by dams. They also offer unimaginable solitude, seeing less angling pressure



Unspoiled and virtually untouched, the ruggedly beautiful Ozernaya River teems with huge rainbow trout, along with dense populations of salmon, char, and big grayling (above). Kamchatka rainbow are strikingly colorful and full of fight (below).

in an 11-week season than a typical Alaskan river sees in a weekend.

To make these amazing waters available to fly fishers, The Best of Kamchatka operates two distinctly different fly-fishing camps. At the "jet boat camp" on the Ozernaya, aka the "Oz," eight anglers per trip stay in four wood-heated cabins and share the dining and other facilities between daylong fishing excursions on 25 miles of the wilderness river. In contrast, six anglers per trip on the Two Yurt take advantage of the "mobile lodge" as they float the river, spending nights in conveniently spaced permanent camps.

Both options put you in wilderness that can only be described as spectacular. Symmetrical snow-rimmed volcanoes—the highest concentration on earth, with more than 160 separated by as little as 110 miles and including 29 active ones—dominate the horizon in all directions. Precipitous buttes alternate with swampy flowering grasslands and valleys of birch, aspen, pine, and willow. At every turn, you can encounter fat, berry-eating, salmon-gorging brown bears.



PHOTO BY JIM KLUG

The Best of Kamchatka uses helicopters to fly anglers to wilderness rivers inaccessible by road. Prime season on these incredibly productive waters runs from July through mid-September.

Since then, Blair, in partnership with Russian outdoorsman Victor Rebrikov, owner of Utgard Expeditions, has guided, managed, and developed fishing camps on both coasts of the Kamchatka Peninsula. It was their invitation that brought me to Kamchatka.

Kamchatka Opens to Anglers

Historically, the Kamchatka Peninsula was one of the most mysterious regions in the Russian empire. The Soviet military established an elaborate Cold War listening outpost here in the 1950s to spy on the West. Subsequently, the area was kept secret for more than 60 years, inadvertently protecting one of the world's last remaining strongholds of salmon, steelhead, rainbow trout, sea-run char, Dolly Varden, and grayling.

With the end of the Cold War and the restructuring movement known as "perestroika," the door opened to previously isolated Russian destinations like Kamchatka. A handful of American outfitters and guides took advantage. Among them was Will Blair, who began exploring the Two Yurt in 2000 and the Ozernaya in 2003.



The Ozernaya

I first glimpsed the Oz through the porthole of a Russian M18 helicopter just before 9 p.m. on the evening of August 8. I was jammed in shoulder to shoulder with two groups of anglers. Seven would join me to fish the Oz. Six others would continue in the chopper to float the Two Yurt River. A mountain of dry bags, duffels, and rod cases was piled to the ceiling in the rear of the chopper. Headphones and earplugs muffled the roar of whirling rotors. We'd been airborne for about an hour, buzzing low like a mosquito over the lush, vibrant green landscape with thick stands of conifers, boggy marshes, and small clear creeks meandering like snakes. On the horizon, smoking cones of snow-rimmed



PHOTO BY MARK LANCE

The Ozernaya and Two Yurt Rivers are loaded with trophy-class salmonids, such as this huge, colorful Dolly Varden (above). Anglers enjoy a double hookup on the 100-mile-long Ozernaya, which is primarily a wade-fishing river (below).

volcanoes appeared almost side by side. Nowhere was there the barren Arctic tundra that is so common in Alaska.

Sourced from cold-water springs, snowmelt, and a single tributary that flows from a mountainous lake, the Oz twists and turns on its 100-mile journey to the Bering Sea. Beneath its surface swim huge rainbow trout ranging from 18 to 27 inches, with larger specimens a cast away. Just a week earlier, a 32-inch rainbow had been netted after slamming a size 6 Morrish Mouse. Trophy-size grayling, with their distinctive translucent dorsal spines, eat dry flies willingly; sea-run and resident Dolly Varden, with olive-green sides shading to a white belly peppered with reddish orange spots, eagerly slam streamers; incalculable numbers of spawning chinook, silver, chum, and sockeye salmon, as well as sea-run char, flood the Ozernaya from June through September.

Oz rainbows feast on the salmon biomass and grow muscle, size, and weight quickly. Another rich food source is millions of fresh-water sculpin that cover the



PHOTO BY MARK LANCE

river bottom, reaching 7 inches long. It's easy to see why big streamers like Sculpzillas, Zuddlers, Dalai Lamas, and Morrish Sculpins produce violent, hair-raising strikes. Any day on the Oz offers realistic expectations of landing your biggest trout ever, even if that was just yesterday.

Beginning after runoff in July and continuing through mid-September, only eight anglers fish roughly 50 miles of river each week. Guides run 20-foot, flat-bottomed aluminum johnboats powered by 40-horsepower outboards. Each guide has his own beat covering 8 to 15 miles. The fishing days begin around 9:30 a.m. and boats return to camp by 6:30 p.m.

Most of the fishing

on the Oz is wading, but when the river runs high, as it did in 2013, you cast tight to the banks from the boat. A 7-weight with a tapered 6-foot, 10-pound steelhead/salmon leader is perfect for chucking streamers. Without exception, you can expect a violent strike on every second or third cast. And you never know what you have until the fish either stays deep (it's a Dolly or grayling) or skyrockets out of the water to show its rainbow stripe.

The Best of Kamchatka

HIGHLIGHTS

Both the single camp on the Oz and the five wayside camps along the Two Yurt feature A-frame cabins designed for two people. They are comfortable, dry, and mostly bug free. A wood-burning stove provides heat, and in the evening a generator supplies electricity. Flush toilets and a classic Russian banya (wood-fired hot shower) are rustic luxuries.



PHOTO BY JIM KLUG

Breakfast and dinner are served family style; lunch is streamside. Russian beer and vodka are available along with strong coffee, chai tea, and soft drinks. Evening campfires are a great way to end the day.

It's worth noting that Kamchatka is home to the highest recorded density of brown bears on earth. Population estimates range from 10,000 to 14,000. They trample undergrowth on hillsides, flatten scrub along the riverbank, and squash river grasses as they make themselves places to lie down and patiently await the arrival of salmon. Bear trails are visible everywhere, but less visible are the bears themselves. Access to a rich diet of salmon, pine nuts, and berries makes them less of a threat to humans.

When bears do get close to camp or near the riverbank, as they often will, a special breed of hunting dog, a laika—the generic name for several breeds in north-



PHOTO BY JIM KLUG

ern Russia and Siberia—picks up their scent and starts barking. Unafraid and fearless, the dogs will charge a grizzly and nip at its ankles. We witnessed a dog-bear encounter on our first day of fishing on the Two Yurt.

In two weeks, I sighted six bears. Most memorable was encountering a large male that was swimming across the river 30 feet in front of our jet boat, while a female and three cubs gorged themselves on spawned-out salmon at the top end of a braided channel.



Before exploring many of Kamchatka's most remote rivers, Will Blair spent years guiding in Alaska and is quick to point out the differences: "Rainbow trout developed in Kamchatka before migrating eastward to Alaska and beyond. This is where they came from. Kamchatka is farther south than Alaska, with . . . more biomass in the rivers. The combination of staggering runs of migrating salmon, millions of native sculpins as long as 7 inches, and consistent hatches of mayflies, caddisflies, and stoneflies accounts for the absurd numbers of big rainbows."

Unlike in Alaska, Blair also notes, there's absolutely no reason to fish plastic beads. "We fish with [conventional] flies, mice patterns, streamers, and dries on floating lines with short, 6- or 7.5-foot leaders and OX tippet."



PHOTO BY JIM KLUG

When you travel to the Oz and Two Yurt, you have the place to yourself: no other people, camps, or lodges. You won't see or hear a float-plane. No one will try to beat you to a stretch of river. There is absolutely no need to rush. Each day, it's just you, your fishing companion, and your guide on miles of river scarcely fished by another human.

When tired of throwing big streamers, I grabbed my 6-weight and cast a size 6 Morrish Mouse. You make more casts with a mouse before a strike, but when a huge 'bow charges your rodent like an angry bull chasing a rodeo clown, the extra effort is well worth it. Hands down, the Ozernaya is the ultimate adventure for anglers seeking high catch rates and battles with fat, sassy, willing rainbows while discovering true wilderness and a touch of rustic luxury.

The Two Yurt

The Oz, and the Dvukhyurtochnaya—more easily pronounced when you call it the Two Yurt—are as different as chalk and cheese. In a nutshell, the Two Yurt is more confined than the broad, open reaches of the Oz, making countless twists and turns through a picturesque valley framed by towering buttes covered with dense stands of poplar, birch, and tamarack. The climate can be humid, even muggy at times, and the riverbanks are thick with willows, alder brush, and high grasses. Bear trails flank both banks and are easily visible where the grass has been flattened.

Changing from fast and rocky to mellow and back to fast again, the Two Yurt's personality is fragmented. It's too small for a jet boat, so each day the anglers and their gear cover the 8 to 10 river miles between established camps on large rafts. My group floated a 45-mile section beginning not far from the river's outfall at Two Yurt Lake. Our first two days were productive, probably because we were closer to spawning salmon.

The rainbows ran between 16 and 22 inches, with a few big boys pushing 24 inches. Nearly all the fishing

was on foot, often reminding me of targeting steelhead: cast . . . take a step . . . cast again. The current in many places made wading challenging. What I liked most was working close to the grassy shore and casting a mouse pattern straight down the bank. Twitching it out and across the current provoked rainbows to charge and try to kill the rodent.

The best streamer on the Two Yurt was the Dalai Lama in black. As in the Oz, sculpins were big and plentiful, and the fish couldn't seem to resist the Dalai's flash and motion. I fished a 5-weight rod and used only a floating line. However, I would recommend bringing a 6-weight if you want a bit more muscle for casting streamers.

In a few stretches, we were only able to fish from the raft because of the swift current. This approach turned out to be very productive as well and was a welcome rest from wading over slippery rocks. During six days of fishing, everyone in our party of intrepid anglers caught huge numbers of rainbows and Dollys, as well as grayling, and took home enough memories to fill several pairs of waders. Fishing the Two Yurt is a true

wilderness adventure that requires a solid level of fitness, at least intermediate fly-fishing skills, and a willingness to be patient and remain aware that you've ventured into the "wild, wild East" of Kamchatka.

Of Mice and Fish

"Every angler who comes to Kamchatka wants to catch a rainbow on a mouse pattern," says The Best of Kamchatka owner Will Blair, who explains that Kamchatka's 'bows are aggressive surface feeders that will chow down on a wide

variety of prey, especially if their quarry is skittering across the surface like a rodent on the run. "Mice or shrews aren't very good swimmers. They sometimes drown if they end up in water. That's why they skitter," adds Blair.

In spite of advice before the trip on what mouse patterns worked best, the guys at both camps brought dozens of different mouse and vole patterns, some so realistic that the only thing missing was a hunk of cheese. But, again, the best pattern was a size 6 or 8 Morrish Mouse.

The rainbows that did charge a mouse would literally push water like a Trident submarine surfacing. More often than not, the fish would come unhooked yet be undeterred. A trout in any other river would head for cover. Not here. Once, twice, even three times, the rainbow would frantically search and slash the water for its injured prey. The water is so clear you get to see the entire attack. I had never seen a trout just keep attacking a fly.

"The Kamchatka trout experience with dry flies is about hunting big fish [that] are also on the hunt," notes Blair. He adds, "I guess you could say predator hunts prey and prey turns into predator to hunt more prey. Kinda wild, really."

You simply have to experience the thrill of fishing a mouse in Kamchatka firsthand to even begin to imagine the rush.

In 30 years of fly fishing the world's rivers, I never imagined I would experience such an abundance of species in such a wild setting. It was indeed my trip of a lifetime. When I returned to the States, my wife, Pam, asked, "Is Kamchatka for everyone?"

It's probably not. But if you want to experience the best rainbow trout fishing left on the planet, walk in rivers where few humans have ever stepped, and lay claim to visiting one of the most remote and wild regions of the Russian Far East, then yes, move Kamchatka to the head of your list. ➤

Michael Hamilton is a veteran journalist and freelance outdoor and travel writer who lives in Seattle, Washington.



Kamchatka rainbows grow to over 30 inches, to furthering the allure of these special fish and this magical wilderness, these 'bows love mouse patterns.



Kamchatka FAQs

What is the season? July–mid-September

How do I get there? A convenient 4-hour flight between Anchorage and Petropavlovsk, Russia, typically leaves on Thursday morning and returns you the following Thursday. Buses and helicopters ferry you to the Ozernaya and Two Yurt.

What travel papers do I need? You will need a current passport and a visa to enter Russia, but no immunizations are required. *Information on Russian visa requirements:* (800) 215-4378, www.allstatepassports.com/russia.html.

What tackle should I bring? 9-ft. rods, 6- to 7-wt. for the Ozernaya, 5- to 6-wt. for the Two Yurt; floating lines (optional 15-ft. sinking-tip line, type 4); 6- and 7.5-ft. leaders with 0.012–2X tippet; disk-drag reels and backing to handle screaming runs.

What other gear should I bring? Be smart; pack light. Waterproof rain jacket and guide-weight Gor-Tex waders; felt-sole wading boots are best (no studs). Layered clothing for warmth (fleece, etc.); protective hat, polarized sunglasses (amber is best), bug net, BuzzOff shirt, insect repellent, sunscreen (SPF 55); sleeping bag (air mattresses are provided); waterproof gear bags. See "Miscellaneous Equipment Checklist" at www.thebestofkamchatka.com for current information.

What temperatures can I expect? July, 50–68 degrees; August, 53–68 degrees; September, 46–59 degrees.

What flies should I bring? Important: Do not bring streamers larger than 4X long, size 4, or mice tied on bass-style stinger hooks. Dalai Lama (black, olive), Zuddlers (black, olive), sculpin patterns (olive, black, tan), rabbit leeches (black, purple), smolt patterns, Muddler Minnows, traditional salmon flies (pink, chartreuse), Parachute Adams, Stimulator (yellow, orange), Elk-Hair Caddis, assorted mayfly patterns, Morrish Mouse.

What else should I consider?

First, consider renting a satellite phone; cellphones don't generally work. Also consider buying travel cancellation insurance (not the same as emergency medical evacuation or trip insurance). When traveling to Kamchatka, expect the unexpected. Take a deep breath and relax. Be sure to read The Best of Kamchatka's brochure, available from Will Blair, (530) 941-8524, www.thebestofkamchatka.com.

