

STORY BY RENE LIMERES

The giant helicopter's turbines scream to life and the massive rotors begin spinning. With our mountain of gear stowed in the cavernous cargo hold, we're all set to go, feeling the intense excitement of the high adventure that awaits us, here in Far East Russia, on the fishing trip of a lifetime! The flight engineer give the thumbs up, and the engines rev, creating a deafening roar as the plane shakes and wobbles down the runway.

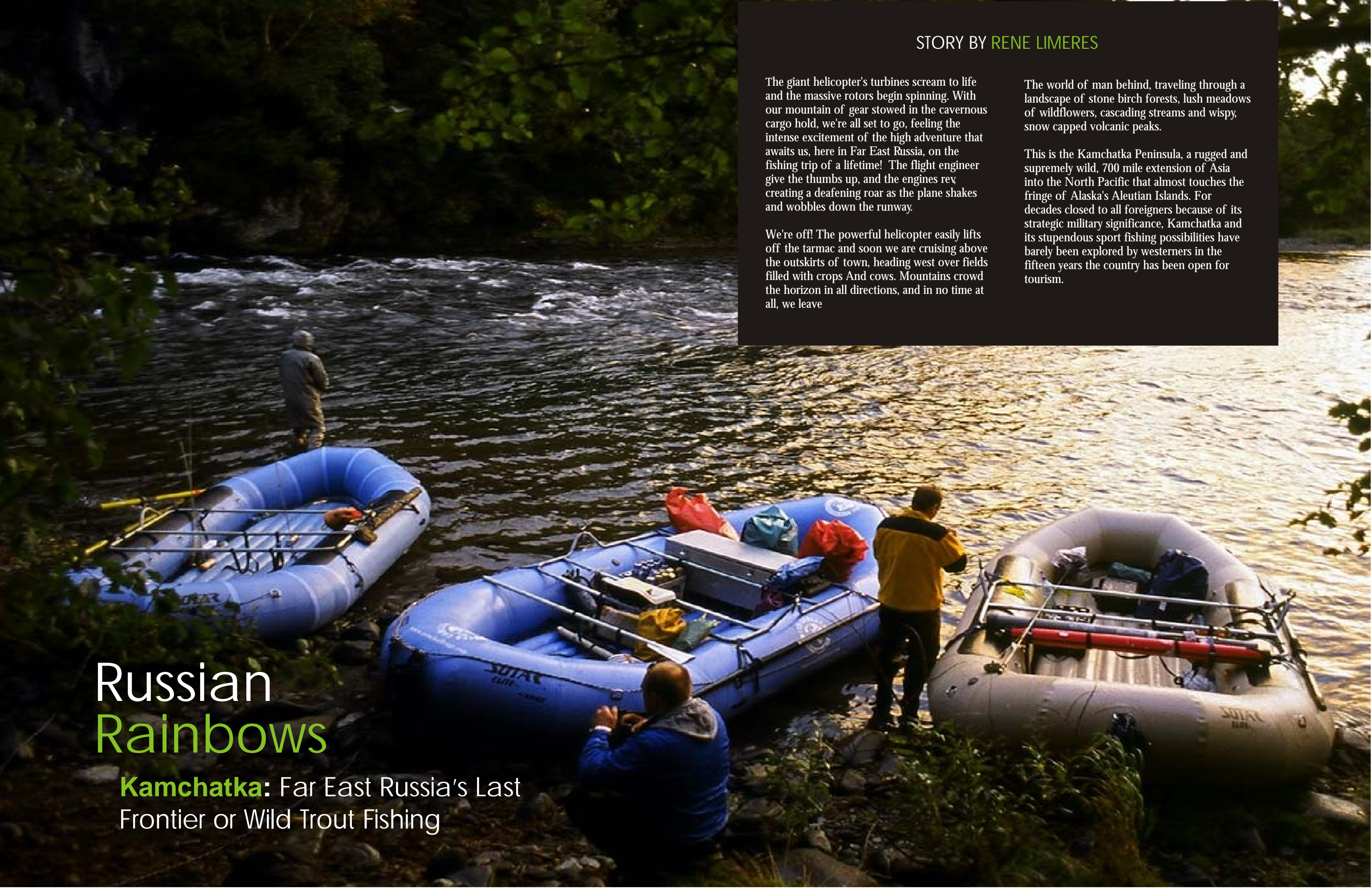
We're off! The powerful helicopter easily lifts off the tarmac and soon we are cruising above the outskirts of town, heading west over fields filled with crops And cows. Mountains crowd the horizon in all directions, and in no time at all, we leave

The world of man behind, traveling through a landscape of stone birch forests, lush meadows of wildflowers, cascading streams and wispy, snow capped volcanic peaks.

This is the Kamchatka Peninsula, a rugged and supremely wild, 700 mile extension of Asia into the North Pacific that almost touches the fringe of Alaska's Aleutian Islands. For decades closed to all foreigners because of its strategic military significance, Kamchatka and its stupendous sport fishing possibilities have barely been explored by westerners in the fifteen years the country has been open for tourism.

# Russian Rainbows

**Kamchatka:** Far East Russia's Last  
Frontier or Wild Trout Fishing



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## “THE LAST GREAT PLACE FOR WILD TROUT FISHING....”

Like Alaska, this isolated northern province has abundant salmon runs (six species) in nearly all its rivers, but its phenomenal rainbow trout fishing has garnered most of the attention of the world coldwater angling fraternity. Many are calling it the last great place for wild trout fishing and comparing it to Alaska of 50 years ago. We are here now, in early September, to target these robust Russian rainbows (called “mikizha” by the natives) that we've heard so much about.

The big chopper continues on a course west and south, through misty mountain passes, over extensive lava fields and around the slopes of immense volcanoes. Our destination is a rocky creek that is the primary headwaters of a major river that flows off the west side of Kamchatka's mountainous spine and empties into the Sea of Okhotsk. To my knowledge, no one has ever run this tributary and few, if any, have sampled the waters of the upper mainstem, where we will be fishing most of the trip

Just how good is the trout fishing in Kamchatka and how does it compare with other great destinations? Make no mistake, the 49th state still has some of the best rainbow fishing on the planet, and Chile, Patagonia and New Zealand rank right up there as well. What sets Kamchatka apart, other than its awesome country

(located in the crucible of the Pacific's “Ring of Fire” it has one of the greatest concentrations of active volcanoes, geysers and hot springs in the world), is the quantity and quality of its big trout water. Unlike Alaska, where a significant number of rivers are too large or too silty to fish effectively with a fly rod, Kamchatka's streams, almost all runoff or spring fed, are crystal clear and of just the right size and flow to offer perfect wade and cast conditions for the fly angler.

If you've fished Alaska and other places in recent years, you know how difficult it can be to find solitude on some of the more popular and productive locations.

Kamchatka has dozens, if not hundreds of streams on both coasts that have never been explored by sport anglers, with most of the tour operators presently concentrating on a handful of rivers within reach of the major hubs. What other places these days can offer fishermen a pick of streams where they can cast to big trout that have never seen a fly?

For our Kamchatka fishing adventure, my friends and I chose the most adventurous option available and one with the least amenities: a “float and fish” expedition using rafts and tent camps. (The other choices available for anglers at present are fishing programs run from a lodge or

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or base camp, using jet boats for access.) For supreme adventure anglers like myself (I've been exploring Alaska's wild rivers by raft for almost 30 years), there is no more intimate way to experience a country's wild nature and it's fishing.

The helicopter descends on to a grassy meadow by the stream, and we all help unload the gear and food. With little fanfare, the big bird takes off, leaving us on our own in total wilderness for the next eight days. The Russian guides waste no time in setting up our deluxe camp and inflating the rafts, while we rig up rods and don waders to test the fishing. Who will be the first to catch a Russian rainbow?

## TROUT FISHING NIRVANA

Just as we had hoped, the trout are waiting for us in the swift, rocky flows nearby. Using a variety of patterns- nymph, forage and hopper flies- our group coaxes fat rainbows from behind boulders, in the calmer water of pools, and in tailouts below the abundant rapids. These fish aren't as hefty as the ones we'll take from the larger mainstem in the days ahead, averaging perhaps 16 inches, but they make up for it in sheer feistiness and beauty, as they are marked with gorgeous hues of pink pearl and profuse black spotting.

For these smaller stream conditions and more diminutive trout, most of the group gets by fine fishing five weights

and floating lines for the first couple of days. As we descend downstream into more water and larger rainbows, we switch to six and seven weights with floating and short sink tips to match the more challenging conditions. We use much of the same methods and flies here as we do in Alaska: nymphing, drifting egg/flesh flies or beads, stripping forage and attractor patterns, etc., in likely looking water.

One of the highlights of trout fishing in Kamchatka is the great dry fly action available due to the presence of abundant insect life. Even though this is fall, with frosty nights, during the warmest part of each day we encounter swarms of midges, mayflies and stoneflies, with attendant hordes of rainbow trout and Dolly Varden charr slurping them on the surface. As we quickly discover, some of the trout and charr become quite selective during these hatches, refusing all manner of enticement save an appropriate insect imitation.

Using mouse flies is, of course, the ultimate "dry fly fishing" for big trout, and Kamchatka's rainbows, when not actively feeding on insects or salmon roe, are more than willing to oblige us when we skate deerhair, fur and foam rodent imitations along the water's edge. Nothing quite matches the excitement of a big hungry trout annihilating a large topwater fly, especially when you can see it coming! On the better days, some of my comrades take up to a dozen beautiful trout fishing this way.

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The trout are spread out fairly evenly along the river, but there are definitely some hotspots, where the action comes fast and furious. Besides the insect hatches, which provide some of the most exciting fishing, we look for salmon (this river, like many in Kamchatka, has a late run of sockeyes, that turn bright red and are easily seen) in their spawning beds of pea sized gravel, because we know the opportunistic rainbows and Dolly Varden will be there in great numbers to steal the rich roe. These areas can provide some of the most concentrated fishing imaginable, so many nice fish, you might wonder if you are catching the same ones over and over. From one such hole, one of my buddies fishing downstream from me takes 23 rainbows and Dolly Vardens, without changing position!



Much has been said of the hefty size of Kamchatka's rainbows. Overall, we found the average on this river to be somewhat over 20 inches, with the largest specimens (up to 30 inches) taken on the last few days of fishing, when we floated through bigger water. Southern Kamchatka's warmer (than Alaska) climate and rich biota of available food sources no doubt are contributing factors, but there may be a genetic component to the large size of these trout, as recent research on the life histories of these remarkable fish suggests.

According to data accumulated over the last ten years or so, many of Kamchatka's rainbows spend some portion of the year in saltwater or estuaries. A small but significant number of fish spend a good part of their lives at sea and are very much like our steelhead along the eastern Pacific. The rainbow populations from rivers on the west side of the peninsula show a mix of life history variations, with river resident fish predominating in most systems. Fall run steelhead occur in varying numbers, and are taken incidentally during late September and early October.

## OTHER FISHING HIGHLIGHTS

Kamchatka's fabulous trout are certainly the main draw for anglers these days, but her rivers hold a variety of other species to round out the fishing. The Dolly Varden charr, which we encountered plenty of on our fall trip, is a beautiful, hard fighter found in great numbers with the rainbow trout. It takes dry flies eagerly and is a

great eating fish as well. Another species of charr, unique to Far East Russia, is called "kundzha" by the locals, or east Siberian charr (*Salvelinus leucomenis*). Not near as plentiful as the Dolly Varden, and differently marked, it gets as large as 20 pounds or more in certain drainages. The 'kundzha' and most of the Dolly Varden come in from the sea bright silver during early to late summer to feed heavily on salmon eggs and flesh, then remain in freshwater and develop brilliant spawning colors before breeding in late fall.

Kamchatka's abundant salmon runs currently receive scant pressure from visiting anglers, and mostly incidentally, where the main focus is trout. Nearly everyone in our group in September catches a few silver salmon, and on trips in early summer, the possibilities expand to chum, red, and king salmon, plus another exotic found only in the Far East, the cherry salmon or masu. As in Alaska, these fish can be taken on a variety of methods. Keep in mind that since most of the trout trips target areas upriver, most of the salmon encountered are in less than prime condition.

(In hopes of enticing serious salmon anglers and expanding their fishing programs, several tour operators are now offering salmon fishing camps near the mouths of some of the more productive rivers. These camps offer rustic accommodations for sure, but they also provide exciting opportunities to explore

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Another facet of Kamchatka's pioneer fisheries. Reports from some of the first groups of anglers at these salmon camps are promising.)

Compared to fishing other locations like the Rockies or New Zealand, Kamchatka really doesn't require much in the way of expertise, other than perhaps knowing how to make basic wet fly swings and being able to cast a dry fly a short distance during hatches. (Remember, these are big, wild hungry rainbows that are not the least sophisticated in their feeding habits. Most of the time they will hit just about anything )

Folks with little flyfishing experience or even rank beginners can even expect to do well here. One of the guys on our trip, who essentially has done no flyfishing before, is able, by the second day-with some instruction- to hook trout consistently. On the third day, we have lunch below some boulder strewn rapids, and after eating, with my prompting, he tosses out a mouse pattern from the rocks above and takes four hog belly rainbows in the same number of casts!

## RIVER TRIP, RUSSIAN STYLE

What makes these Kamchatka fishing trips so unique, besides the awesome trout fishing and the stupendous country, is that they give folks a chance to interact personally with natives and get a glimpse of Russian culture. The trips are American led, but run by the Russians. The guides are big, earthy guys with names like Sasha, Andrei and Sergei, who have knowledge of the country and the fishing that is second to none. They are seasoned woodsmen, used to hard work and making do, so their style of camping and floating a river is quite different than anything you may have experienced elsewhere. In addition to the guides, the staff includes at least one and sometimes two cooks, tough Russian girls who are fantastic at whipping up scrumptious meals from scratch, but can hold their own among a group of guys out on the river, too.

Each morning at about seven, we awake to the sound of pounding axes and a crackling fire, as the Russians prepare the morning's breakfast. (They do all their cooking over wood fires, and use an ingenious set of nestling buckets and big Dutch ovens for cookware.) Breakfast is simple but hearty and consists usually of scalding coffee or tea dipped from a bucket, Russian crepes (called "Bleenee") and jam,



and thick porridge made with milk.

We break camp usually by nine and start fishing the river, wading and casting mostly, with some fishing from the rafts, when we are floating over stretches of water that cannot be worked well from shore. The "kitchen boat" always goes on by ahead of us and has hot lunch waiting for the group somewhere downriver.

We fish until about five or six in the evening, then the Russians make camp. Dinner is an elaborate affair, several courses of Russian dishes, served in a large dining tent, along with all the beer and vodka you could want to drink. Afterwards, some of the guys go fishing; some of them remain around camp, lounging by the fire under a large shelter our hosts erect to keep us out of the rain.

Each day on the river is different, with changing country, weather and water conditions as we make our way down from the mountains to the sea. The progression of fall brings a kaleidoscope of color and an almost poetic beauty to our surroundings, prompting endless expressions of awe and the recognition that in Kamchatka we may have found, if not the world's best trout fishing, then surely the prettiest trout destination in all the world. We are lucky to be among the relatively few anglers to sample this paradise before it is spoiled.

Like all great adventures, our fishing trip with the Russians ends too soon, and the last night on the river finds us around the fire, doing endless vodka toasts and recounting some of our fishing exploits upriver. The mood is light, but bittersweet. We are totally satisfied with our week of stupendous fishing, but know that after an experience like this, our favorite trout haunts back home will never seem the same. We'll probably have to come back to remind ourselves of what trout fishing was meant to be. And that's perfectly OK with me.

*Rene Limeres is a wilderness fishing guide and outdoors writer, with many years experience on the rivers of Southwest Alaska and Russia's Far East. He has written numerous articles for major sporting publications and has a best selling award winning book, "Alaska Fishing: The Ultimate Angler's Guide, 3rd Edition", available through bookstores and tackle and fly shops, or online at [www.ultimaterivers.com](http://www.ultimaterivers.com)*