



BY JAN DELAPORTE

# A RUSSIAN REVOLUTION



BRINGING BACK THE UMBA REQUIRES A NEW  
WAY OF THINKING—ENTER LIVE RELEASE.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAN DELAPORTE, OLE THOMSEN AND STEFFEN JUHL

**J**UST AFTER THE FALL OF THE IRON CURTAIN, back in the late 1980s and early 90s, the Kola Peninsula was a wild place. Wild in the sense that it was empty and raw, with a natural beauty found in few places elsewhere on the planet. But it was also untamed as in the “Wild West” sense. It was fast becoming the playground of adventurers, tour operators, mobster bosses, scammers, altruists, and salmon anglers. My good friend Steffen Juhl was one of the latter, and in 1993, with a few other Swedes, had signed on to fish the Strelna. A small spate river which runs into the White Sea east of the village of Varzuga, it was controlled by a somewhat shady Russian operator who had sold exclusive rights to that same week to five different foreign tour operators.

Out of the chaos that ensued, Juhl was redirected to the Uмба River by the region’s main person of influence at the time, a charismatic Ukrainian by the name of Kalujin Svyatoslav Michailovich. Thus began Juhl’s long love affair with Russian salmon angling. He became so enthralled with this river, he simply decided to stay on after the trip and signed on as the Loop fishing camp manager.

The Uмба is, in fact, a very long river system flowing from lakes and rivers far inside the Kola Peninsula. From Poncho Lake, the Krivetz River flows for a stretch

sits a tiny village complete with little Russian dachas or summer cottages. The setting is an intimate one, framed by tall pines and dwarf birch trees. Northern rivers on the Kola Peninsula, like the Yokanga, Kharlovka, and Ponoï are more open and barren. On the Uмба, it is easy to read the water; in a lot of pools a skilled spey caster can reach the opposite bank and cover all the best salmon holding water.

A trek on the winding forest paths along the Uмба and its chief tributary the Krivetz is a very special



Excellent fishing, an intimate setting and a warm, wooden, luxurious lodge await anglers who visit the Uмба River on the Kola Peninsula.



of 3.8 km until it meets the Niezma tributary. Here, it becomes the lower Uмба and flows for 10 km before entering the White Sea. Salmon spawn all the way through the system, even past Poncho Lake into the Upper Uмба and other tributaries.

The Uмба River is unlike most other places on the Kola Peninsula. For the most part, it is not located far out into the wilderness. It can be reached by road and thus is more like the “real” Russia. Right across from the new lodge, which was finished by Michailovich in 2000,

experience, especially in the glowing colors of autumn. White-tailed eagles soar over the treetops, while blueberries and lingonberries offer a snack a tired angler appreciates. The Uмба is classic salmon fishing water and along with the Ponoï is the only Kola River to offer a fall season.

No wonder Juhl fell in love. When he first worked on the river, both spring and autumn saw superlative catches. Anglers were landing 20-30 fish, many in the 20 and 30-lb range. From May, far into October and November fat, fresh salmon, often with sea lice, tantalized anglers on the Uмба. A glance at the records reveal catches of 2,200 to 2,700 salmon per season for multiple years.

It all seemed too good to be true, Juhl says sadly. And it was. In the beginning of the new century, just as modern development in the form of roads, gas stations, better vehicles and improved communication technology reached the area, net fishing at the river mouth began to take a terrible toll. The added access, new monofilament nets, mobile phones, and other contemporary technology provided poachers with a lucrative opportunity for increased earnings in this generally poor region. There were few controls and Loop and



their camp manager left the Umba in 2002, eventually ending up in the more isolated, but fish-filled rivers of the North, such as the Ponoï.

Kalujin Michailovich and other Russians involved in promoting the Umba region realized that if the situation did not improve, neither would the angling. And without a reliable salmon run, the Umba's value would soon sink to almost nothing.

In Russia, when chaos reigns, it can be like the Wild West. But they have their own version of the cavalry and on the Umba it has arrived in the form of heavily armed fishing inspectors. These regular patrols forced poachers off the river to the river mouth.

To establish an observation post there, Kalujin built an additional lodge right by the river mouth. It worked; poaching on the river and at the mouth fell off dramatically. In order to make poaching less economically

Fly-fishing in Russia is becoming increasingly popular among locals, a development that is further helping the Atlantic salmon of the Umba.

attractive, a plan was introduced by a group of private Russian anglers to open a fish shop in the town of Umba that would offer cheaper, farmed Norwegian salmon.

The increased attention to conservation and protection that the Umba is receiving from Russian angling interests has resulted in markedly better catches from 2007 to 2009. The 2010 fall season has confirmed these trends, but also shown an increase in the average size of salmon.

Virtually unknown in Russia before foreign visitors began arriving, fly-fishing has undergone an explosion in popularity among Russians. An association of fly fishers has sprung up in Murmansk. Pressure from outside and within has resulted in the Umba becoming somewhat of a live release river. Only live release licenses are sold to visitors, but locals can still retain one fish. The new regulations have increased the potential for even higher returns of bigger MSW fish.

A team of Swedish fisheries biologists recently visited the Umba and electro-fished the Krivetz tributary. They found that smolt reproduction is at a maximal level and the smolt return rate to sea is at 100% in terms of spawning potential. The Swedes said they had never seen anything like it in all the rivers they have examined. Juhl, who has returned to the region and organizes trips through his company, Salmon Junkies, tells me that the average weight of fresh ocean-run fish has not been this high since 1998. A lot of salmon between



11 and 16-lbs. are being caught now. The very big salmon are rare, but they are still there, as can be witnessed by the recent take of a 57-pounder.

Juhl is in love all over again. His strategy is simple. If he can keep the anglers coming the government, as well as private Russian and international outfitters, will recognize the value of protecting the Uмба from wanton poaching and pollution. I accompanied Juhl on a trip to the Uмба last autumn. We stayed at the luxury lodge built by Michailovich (sadly this 'Godfather' of fly-fishing in the area died in a tragic auto accident last summer). On my last day, I fished the Lohkinga Pool on my own. The weather was perfect, sunny and calm; the air crisp with the promise of the oncoming winter.

I had already landed and released two sea-liced grilse in a spot that produced fish for me all week. I sat on the bank, contemplating the deeper meanings of existence and happiness. Well maybe this is it; being right here, right now in the moment.... soon salmon fever takes over again and I cast into a deep V, which forms the natural border between Lohkinga and the next pool. Everything seemed to happen perfectly. My first cast went exactly where I intended it. There was that wonderful feeling of the fly and line moving perfectly through the water, and that life-giving, heart throbbing sense that something would happen. And it did. Just where the V from the current begins to sweep the line faster, the fly stopped. I mean literally stopped. I strike. Nothing. A complete standstill. The salmon sinks down into the deep and slow water behind a ledge.



With better fishing due to less poaching, the Uмба region is benefitting economically from an increase in visiting anglers.

For perhaps 10 minutes we remained locked in this position. Then, I managed to get the fish into quieter water where it ran and leapt numerous times, until with an audible crack, it broke my rod. Somehow, I still managed to land and release it. It looked to me to be over 20 pounds as it streaked back into deeper water. I couldn't wait to tell Juhl. He would be sad that I lost my rod, but happy that another large fish was headed upstream to contribute further to the Uмба comeback. And besides, I thought, as I headed up the wooded trail back to camp, better a broken rod than another broken heart.

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Photojournalist Jan Delaporte is usually on the move covering news stories, but he always finds the time to wet a line in the nearest salmon river. 🎣

