



KAMCHATKA BROWN BEAR SPRING 2024 HUNT REPORT

By Mark Audino, V.P. Arcqos Safaris

The Kamchatka Peninsula, the alluring and pristine wilderness of the Russian Far East, has inspired destination sportsmen for decades. It always delivered on dreams of out-sized brown bears, salmon and trout-choked streams, heavy palmated moose, and prized snow sheep.

But restrictive COVID policies and geopolitical issues imposed a virtual 5-year hiatus on sporting adventures across the entire Russian Federation. On February 17th, 2022, news of WNBA player Britney Griner being held behind bars by Russian authorities caused a knee-jerk, wholesale assumption that all Americans entering Russia would not be welcome, and even worse, would be detained like her. Just a few days later on February 24th Russia invaded Ukraine, adding to the fear factor given USA's opposition to the invasion and proxy military support.

Many Americas still hold to the fears triggered by Griner's arrest. However, the facts are that the hashish oil in her possession is illegal in Russia. She broke the law. And, unfortunately, news headlines reporting on the incident neglected to inform the public that the rest of her entourage and teammates were granted entry without issue.

Fast forward to the fall of 2023. The US State Department was still advising Americas to avoid travel to Russia. But global hunters are familiar with typical admonishments and leverage trusted advisors and intelligence on the ground to make more informed judgments about risks.



ARCQOS OPENS KAMCHATKA – THE BACKGROUND STORY

Arcqos Safaris initiated a comprehensive bottoms-up, fact-based assessment of risk vs. reward in hunting Russia. No matter how attractive any hunting destination is, Job 1 is safety at Arcqos Safaris. So, Arcqos team members in USA, Turkey, Moscow and Petropavlovsk, representing over 100 years of worldwide hunting and adventure planning experience, collaborated in doing the due diligence on present day hunting in Russia. Our goal was to develop a safe, productive, and enjoyable hosted client trip to Kamchatka to hunt its legendary brown bears. We were stoked.

The team built the perfect hunt logistics model for Russia – acquiring visas for us to travel hassle-free there and back, securing permits to take our personal guns, traveling throughout a country where our credit cards simply won't work, arranging ground transportation and helicopter charters, and handling trophies post-hunt.

We had already secured the remotest hunting area, accessible by fly-in only and historically known to produce big bears pre-hiatus. Because there is no legal limit on the number of bears a hunter can take in Kamchatka, our exclusive area had produced an average of 2 bears per hunter for 20 years prior. And 90% of the bears had squared 10 feet or better.

This historical success in the field had been enabled by our professional Itelmen guiding team. Born to hunt, they knew the territory and they knew big bears. So, going in, we knew that no other brown bear destination was comparable, and we were joined by three wonderful hunters who shared our spirit of adventure. We were all confident in the outcome that such precise planning promised.

EXECUTING THE PLAN – GETTING THERE

Wheels-up on Turkish Airlines was April 24 heading to Istanbul, the gateway to many Asian hunting destinations. We were met on arrival by our experienced ground team in baggage claim, and they made easy work of gun clearance and storage during our overnight stay.

A Mercedes van transported us to a country hotel close to the airport so we didn't have to contend with any Istanbul traffic for our early flight the next day.

A 5-hour Aeroflot flight to Moscow on Boeing aircraft the next morning was very pleasant. Americans tend to look and sound, well, "American", and we seemed to amuse the flight attendants who were as gracious as anyone could ever hope to be treated. To be sure, our identities were a dead giveaway when one of us asked for a Diet Coke®.

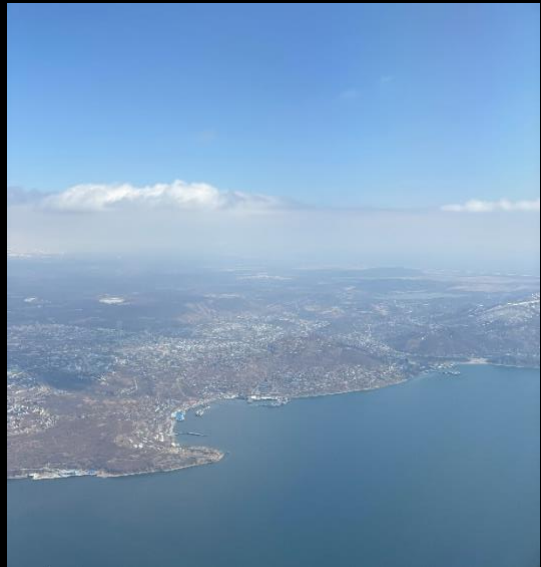


Upon touchdown at Sheremetyevo Airport, a picture of our veteran Russian Hunt Manager popped up on my phone with a message, "we are here". His education and excellent command of English, in addition to his longstanding hunting experience, proved invaluable at every checkpoint. He assisted us with clearing Immigration & Passport Control and with clearing our guns with Customs. He would also join us in camp.

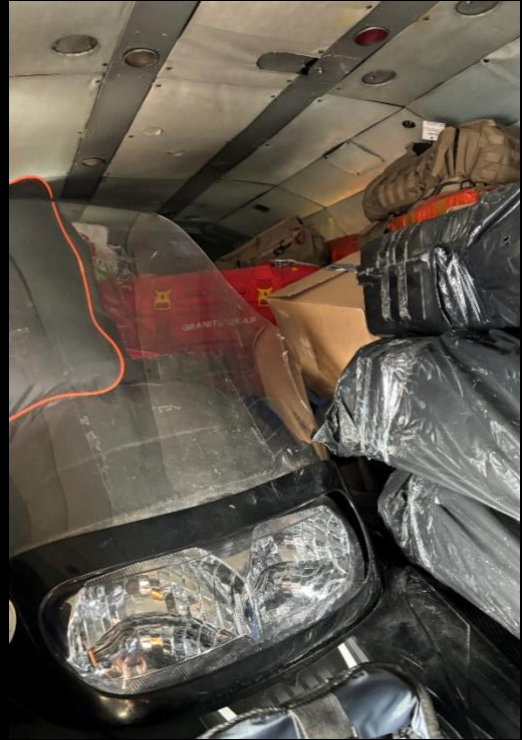


Our Aeroflot flight from Moscow to Petro the next day was nothing short of amazing. We flew Economy Flex Class on a Boeing 777-300ER which provided more comfortable seating, surprisingly good meals, extra baggage allowances, and great service for a very small cost premium. If you are not flying Business Class, this is the way to go. Airline companies in USA could learn a ton from Aeroflot's philosophy on comfort and customer service.

We finally could make out the snow-covered mountain ranges flanking the west coast of Kamchatka along the Okhotsk Sea. We then flew over flat tundra before the mountains flanking the east coast appeared, signaling that we were arriving in Petro. We cleared our guns and packed our gear into Kamchatka's concept of a go-anywhere ATV.



The ride in that beast felt like an armored personnel carrier, but we were happy to be on our way to Esso where our helicopter charter awaited us.



After a night's rest in a vacation lodge, we loaded the workhorse MI-8 jet-assisted helicopter with snow machines, fuel drums, food, and gear, and set off for the 50-minute flight to camp. While skirting some intervening weather we flew over several bears which were easily spotted as they moved across the snow below. We were getting close to "Bear City".

BEAR CAMP

As remote as we were, camp consisted of 5 permanent buildings and a cook/dining tent. Hunters bunked together in a large comfortable room big enough for all of our gear and heated by a wood stove. Camp cook, Vlad, was an old hand at cooking in hunting and fishing camps and he greeted us with a big smile and a hot meal.



TRADITIONAL HUNTING METHOD

Spring means deep snow in Kamchatka. The only question will be how many feet of it each Spring will bring. But snow poses no barrier to our Itelmen guiding team. Like Alaskan Eskimos and the Inuit of the Canadian Arctic, the Itelmen rely on super-tuned snow machines to find fresh tracks and spot bears on the wide-open terrain.

The Itelmen are famous hunters. Their natural hunting instincts, work ethic, trophy quality standards, and precise skinning abilities put them at the top of the wisdom and skills chart for professional guides. As they navigate through the hunting area, hunters are towed in a sled similar to how Polar Bear and Central Barrenground Muskox hunts are conducted.

The hunting method varies from traditional spot & stalk. Deep snow dictates how much walking is even possible. With snow levels typically so deep that you will sink up to the thigh or waist when dismounting the sled, walking is literally impossible. So, the combo of machine and sled is the only way to penetrate the hunting area, locate, and get into position to take a trophy. This form of hunting is cultural for the Itelmen, and hunters adapt to it out of necessity.



GEARED-UP AND LOADED FOR BEAR

We had brought .300, .338 and .375 magnums which rode in soft cases on the snow machines. We each parked ourselves in a surprisingly comfortable chair on the sled and set off across the snow.

Spring had arrived earlier than usual and partial snow melt meant that would be unsticking the machines or sleds or both from the slush usually during afternoons of each day. The early spring had created enough risk of getting stuck that a decision was made to hunt closer together in case one of the hunting units needed help. No ice to make crossing a stream possible? No worries. Get out the mini-chain saw, cut a tree and make a bridge.



Our guides were so adept at dealing with whatever the slushy early Spring dished out that we mostly had to sit still while they helped resolve each other's situation.

When we needed a rest or an energy pick-up, we stopped for lunch and hot tea. Russians are tea drinkers. It's a ritual.

Camo clothing is not a factor on these bear hunts. But warmth is. Think of a snowmobile suit, or a windproof premium hunting coat, coupled with the warmest boots you can find (1000 grams of Thinsulate or better and ideally with a roll-up gaiter), ski goggles, and facemask as the dress code for these bear hunts.

SPRING BEAR BEHAVIORS

Bears den in the forests over winter and we could see tracks leading out of each cluster of birches toward the Okhotsk Sea. Along the way, they feed ravenously on pine nuts, kelp, washed-up carcasses on the beach, and even other bears, which they bury and guard. We saw sows with 4 cubs, and many with 3, a clear signal of good health.



BIG BEARS FROM THE START

A 40-minute ride into the wind over snow and ice was a most refreshing wake-up call each morning. But the real eye-opener came with the sight of a big bear. The first of 11 bears went down to a .338 RUM. Its square head, body bulk, and beautiful fur spoke trophy of a lifetime. What a great bear and happy hunter.



MORE BIG BEARS TAKEN WITH EACH PASSING DAY

Our guides set out each day with the goal of taking only 10 footers or bigger, the Holy Grail of brown bear hunting in Alaska. The difference was the number in that size range that we encountered in Kamchatka. **Of 11 bears taken, 1 squared 9'8, the rest 10' or better, with 2 over the 11' square mark.** The bulk of those 11 footers gave pause to the power they wielded. Skinning those beasts revealed tank-like bones and muscle structure capable of going up and over mountains as easily as they could walk around them, killing anything in their way if hungry.









THE MOST PRODUCTIVE BROWN BEAR HUNT IN THE WORLD



HEADING HOME



A GREAT NIGHT BACK IN INSTANBUL BEFORE HEADING BACK TO USA



A WELCOME BACK TO USA FROM U.S. IMMIGRATION & CUSTOMS

Three of us landed at JFK Airport and our remaining team member landed in LA. We were all warmly greeted by Immigration and our guns were delivered directly to the Customs Offices awaiting inspection of our 4457s. The Customs Officers at both airports could not have been nicer and were generally interested in our guns and stories of the hunt.

ARCQOS IS BULLISH ON RUSSIAN HUNTING GOING FORWARD

While in Kamchatka, I had time to put some final touches on the game plan for our snow sheep and moose hunting programs. The bear trip had completely proved that our logistical plan worked for travel in and out of the Russian Federation. But hunting Kamchatka's snow sheep in August and giant moose in November and December would even be easier because the logistical plans will be virtually identical to bear hunt logistics. Moose and sheep hunts take place in different areas in Kamchatka. So, besides the time of year that we plan to hunt them, getting there is only a matter of which direction the helicopter charters will be headed to reach the camps. The bonus is that we will also be utilizing the same expert Itelmen guiding team for both our snow sheep and moose hunts. They know sheep and moose as well as bears.

KAMCHATKA SNOW SHEEP PROGRAM



The mere mention of "sheep hunting" conjures up images of tough vertical climbing at altitude. Our unpressured snow sheep area has its share of craggy peaks at altitude, but the majority of snow sheep are located and taken between 3,000 and 3,500 feet in elevation. We scout the areas and carefully select where to set up our tented camps. Snow sheep hunts rank as one of the greatest sheep hunting bargains and hunting experiences in the world. Come August every year, we'll be glassing for sheep in Kamchatka.



KAMCHATKA MOOSE PROGRAM



Our two moose camps operate in November and December annually. Hunters will be home for Thanksgiving if they hunt November and home for Christmas if they hunt December. Both areas produce big moose. The December hunt takes place where the current world record was taken.



A SPECIAL ADVENTURE - THE EXCURSION

Kamchatka is a must-hunt destination in its own right. But the Russian mainland adds many other species desirable for hunters. "The Excursion" is a 2-week hunt for Kolyma, Chukotka and Koryak snow sheep, Chukotka and Yakutsk moose, bear, and caribou. Please inquire for more details.

Start Everything from **ZERO**

While in brown bear camp, I was surprised by a birthday celebration and a gift that has many meanings and learnings.

Members of our Russian team presented me with a watch modeled after one that then-President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, presented to President Reagan. It promised opportunity for the future but did so from the unique position of starting from scratch, at the zero position.

This is how we feel about the resumption of hunting in Russia. People of the hunting world are committed to each other and depend on each other, and the Russian people were welcoming and hard-working.

They deserve our support irrespective of what governments do or say. And we will be going back with immutable confidence of having more great hunting experiences.



**CONTACT ARCQOS FOR MORE INSIGHTS AND HUNTING
OPPORTUNITIES IN KAMCHATKA AND ACROSS THE RUSSIAN
FEDERATION**



**THE HIGHEST QUALITY HUNTS FOR ASIA'S PREMIER SPECIES
DILIGENTLY PLANNED AND CONDUCTED**

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