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A steady diet of northern pike in the 40-plus inch range make Utik Lake a much sought-after destination for trophy hunters.



# Spoiled Rotten at Manitoba's Utik Lake

**With a beautiful lodge, and 50-plus inch northern pike at your beckon call, it's easy to lose perspective.** BY CHRIS SHAFFER

**I**'m ruined. Plain and simple. My otherwise grounded perspective on what constitutes a good fishing trip and a really good fishing trip has been blown out of the water and it has everything to do with Utik Lake and its robust northern pike fishery.

It started several years ago when North Star Resort owner Dennis Punches decided to

build a high-end fishing lodge on nearby Utik Lake. The problem was that Utik Lake was accessible by float plane only. Punches was naturally drawn to Utik Lake for its robust pike fishing. He and his staff frequented the lake often on daily fly outs with clients from North Star Resort. It only took a couple seasons of regularly catching 40- to 50-inch northern pike to convince Punches that a lodge on Utik

Lake would pay off. Who could argue with a steady diet of trophy northern pike?

This was not to be your run-of-the-mill fishing lodge either. It was Punches' dream to build a first-class resort on one of the greatest pike fisheries in North America. In order to accomplish that, though, he would have to deal with a tight schedule at the worst possible time. Punches wanted the resort completed by



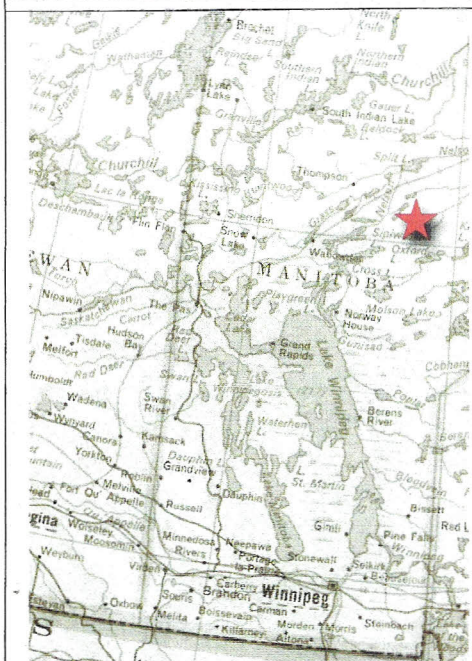
Thumbs up is right. This 45-inch northern pike is enough to make anyone smile.

The interior of North Haven Lodge is beautifully furnished, while the exterior is both rugged and welcoming.

# North Haven

UTIK LAKE, MANITOBA, CANADA

## Trophy Fly-in Resort



June 2008, and the winters in Manitoba are biting cold and downright miserable.

Because there was no road into Utik Lake it meant that materials had to be flown in. For those things that couldn't be flown in, a tem-

porary road had to be built during the winter. So at a time when most Canadians were curled up in front of the heater watching hockey and drinking beer, Punches and his crews devised a plan to build a one-of-a-kind ice road that would temporarily create access into the lake. Rather than struggle to traverse trucks, ATVs and snow machines across the overgrown, wooded and wet landscape, thus doing irreparable damage to the landscape, the temporary ice road was built so 18-wheel trucks could bring supplies to the lake.

That meant that for most of winter crews worked in the freezing cold temperatures where visibility was less than 10 feet at times. During the final four months of the project, a small army of workers busied themselves fin-

ishing the lodge and cabins. And Punches spared no expense.

Bridging the gap between metropolitan anglers (mostly Midwesterners) and isolated Canada, North Haven Resort combines great fishing with extravagant dinners, open spacious rooms with cathedral ceilings, a fully furnished conference center, spa with sauna and hot tub, wireless Internet, over 100 cable television channels viewable on 13 plasma TVs in the main lodge, stunning views of the lake and surrounding landscape, and just about every other modern convenience you'd find in a 5-star hotel.

"A big part of it is what you don't see," says Ryan Smith, the current manager at North Haven Resort. "We're the only facility



A 51-inch northern pike is proof positive that they exist at Utik Lake, left.

A typical shore lunch includes homemade fish and chips.

A client holds up a 50-inch northern, below middle.



on a lake that's 45 miles long. There are no cottages, no houses, no water skiers. It's just a lot of solitude and that's a big allure for the people that come. The big things that people come for is a fishery unparalleled to anywhere—we really do have monster fish—and a facility to match it.”

Throw in an impressive line of 19-foot Lund Pro Guide boats equipped with 75 horse power Yamahas, electric trolling motors and spring loaded seats, and you have the makings for a first-class fishing trip. If there were such a place as the Fisherman's Royal Palace, this would be it. Oh, and did I mention the lake is teeming with massive pike and more walleye than anglers care to catch?

Utik Lake wasn't a covert operation prior to the lodge opening in the summer of 2008. The property was purchased in 2001 and used as a fly-out option for North Star Resort guests. Nonetheless, to keep fishing pressure to a minimum, only 50 North Star Resort guests were allowed to fish here each summer. And in 2008, fewer than 100 anglers had the opportunity. This is where I came in. It was here that my perspective on fishing became skewed.



“I'm not how sure how big the pike get,” says Ryan Coulis, who worked at North Star Resort in 2008. “To be honest more than half of the lake has never been fished. We don't catch as many pike as we do at Knee Lake, but the ones we do catch are monsters.

For trophy pike, Utik has to be the best pike fishery in Canada.”

That may be a bold statement, but Utik has yet to disappoint. It continues to produce pike that run between 40- and 50 inches. At 45 miles long, Utik Lake is situated on the 55th Latitude between Lake Winnipeg and Hudson Bay. Utik's biomass lends to fruitful pike fishing for decades to come. With little to no harvest and fishing pressure that pales to any other major fishery, pike remain free to gorge on walleye, smaller pike, perch, whitefish, suckers, minnows and lake trout. Only a few walleye are sacrificed daily for shore lunches. The walleye are filleted and cooked over an open fire. The meal is akin to something you'd find at Morton's rather than on a small island that's often visited by moose and bears.

Open from June through September, the pike can be approached with flies or lures. Ironically, it is places like Utik that cause one to lose perspective.

“One day the guests are ecstatic about catching 200 pike a day,” said Coulis, who served as my guide when I fished there. “Two



From June through September, Utik Lake kicks out northern pike like the one below on a regular basis.



days later they are trying to pull the hook out of a 36-inch fish because they only want big ones."

Once ice breaks free in June pike can be found in shallow water and sight-fished. The pike venture into these areas because they are the first to warm and the warmer water draws in smaller baitfish, attracts bug life and creates an awesome scene for topwater action, be it with a fly, buzzbait or crankbait.

"This is like a fly-out lake," says Mike Svojanovski, a North Haven guide from Swan River, Manitoba. "There's an abnormally large population of big pike. Most of these pike have never seen a lure or fly in their life."

And due to the lake's remoteness, the robust population of pike in the lake, and lack of fishing pressure, there's a good chance that only a small percentage of the Utik Lake pike will experience the sting of a hook.

In July and August anglers migrate to slightly deeper water to attain bites. As the rest of the natural lake warms the pike

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*North Haven*  
 UTIK LAKE, MANITOBA, CANADA  
*Trophy Fly-in Resort*

Big appetites translate into big pike.

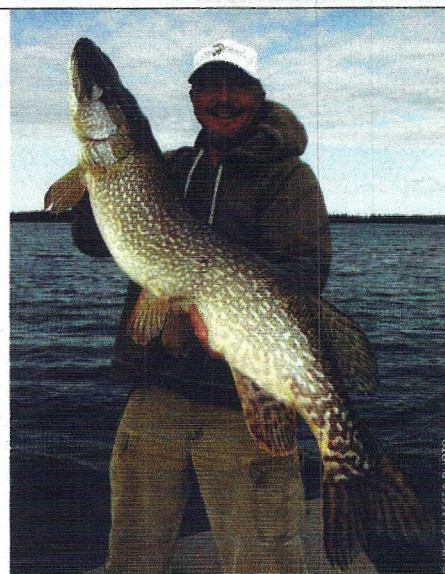


creep into deeper, more oxygenated water toward weed beds where food can become more available.

"You need to find 8- to 12-foot deep cabbage beds with a little coon tail mixed in," adds Svojanovski. "If you can find that in bays or on flats there'll be pike there. A few of the small cabbage beds might have three big fish on them, but the bigger weed beds tend to have the best number of big fish, so look for larger weed beds. Keep in mind, when people come to fish here they aren't interested in catching 42-inch pike. They want the 48- and 50-inch fish."

To better relate to Manitoba's pike and weed affiliation Cree native Jamie Canada explained how generations of natives followed the pike and their tendencies with weeds in Canada's

Heartland. Coon tail, he says, is a fine,



pine tree-like, skinny foliage that draws hordes of pike. The same can be said for what locals refer to as cabbage, a wide leaf water plant that populates this region. On the other hand, ragweed, a skinny and sparse weed is not conducive to attracting pike and should be avoided.

"The coon tail and cabbage are rich in

oxygen and provide shade for the pike," says Canada. "We look for weeds that grow to about three feet below the surface. You don't want them on top because you can't throw a lure through it. And, around here you won't find a pike where there's no weeds."

At Utik, where there are weeds there are pike. And there are lots of weeds. Which means there's pike and also walleye. Lots of them. The walleye fishing is an interesting piece of this fishery. Anglers don't venture here to specifically fish for walleye, however they are part of North Haven's program. Catching walleye is as simple as bluegill in the western United States.

One of the hazards of fishing at Utik Lake—and I can attest to this—is that the extra ordinary becomes routine. It's not too often that you become accustomed to catching trophy pike and walleye on a consistent basis. It causes you to sometimes lose perspective on what is good fishing, and what is really good fishing. It's safe to say Utik Lake offers you an opportunity that is even better than that. Which might cause you to have a skewed view of the fishing world. Because once you fish at Utik Lake it everything else is sublime. Like I said, I'm ruined.