



Above: The author at the tail of the Falls Pool on the Laxá in Dölum, Iceland. Below: Fishing a typical run

MY first trip to Iceland in 25 years began and ended with an error of judgement. Sidling down the scree to Thin Pool the evening we arrived, I invited arch-rival Neil Patterson to try the head of the run before me—four casts in, he hooked a salmon so hefty it could scarcely manoeuvre around the stream. At 18lb, it was the largest for the season from that river.

We had less than three days on the delightful Laxá in Dölum, a mid-sized river two hours' drive north from Reykjavik. Despite being slightly larger than Ireland and with a population the size of Kingston Upon Hull's, Iceland can boast nearly 100 salmon rivers. Visiting the fabled 'land of fire and ice' is an elemental experience; the scooped and scalloped landscape has a severe beauty, from its glacial valleys to the dark volcanic plains on which NASA trained for its moon landings.

Despite its gelid name, this island is agreeably green in places and the valley through which the Dölum flows (Laxardalur) is largely heathland and pasture,

Love bombing in the 'land of fire and ice'

Our fishing correspondent David Profumo and his angling arch-rival attempt to get to grips with strapping Icelandic salmon on the River Laxá in Dölum

featuring in one of the medieval sagas. Rivalry over fishing rights, it seems, stretches back some 10 centuries hereabouts.

British anglers have been travelling to Ultima Thule since Victorian times, but the pioneer at Dölum was Maj-Gen Robert Neil Stewart. A Highlander much decorated during the First World War, he enjoyed a racy personal life, marrying motor speed queen Gwenda Glubb, then bolting with a Georgian refugee. In his book *Rivers of Iceland* (1950), he records that the local store sold only boiled sweets and celery salt, but, on his second morning here, he hooked 15 salmon in one pool. The chairman of PepsiCo,

who built a fine lodge where guests included Neil Armstrong himself, subsequently leased the river from the riparian farmers.

Now, two enterprising young islanders—Jon Thor Juliusson and Halli Eiriksson—who are determined to restore Laxá in Dölum to its glory days, ably manage it. The devastating practice of worming has ceased, most fish are released and rod numbers are restricted to two per each of the three beats. The river offers 33 named pools over 16 fishable miles and there is plenty of varied fly water, from the canyons and crenellations of the upper reaches down through the lower pots and broader runs. A single-hander carrying a number-seven floater



will cover most of it, but, as the water is usually clear, you must proceed stealthily. In places, echelons of salmon may be seen finning in their lies.

When I started next morning up at Solheimafoss, I certainly had something to prove. Patterson twiddled his thumbs as I cast my Sunray into this intriguing, insurmountable Falls Pool—disconcerting for those of us with vertigo (one small step for a man)—but I provoked three follows and a sizeable fish that nipped at the tail of my lure. About such brief encounters, one of Stewart's local pals philosophised: 'Iceland salmon are like Iceland girls; even when you kiss them, you can't be sure of them.' I couldn't possibly comment.

Above: Still friends: the author (right), his rival (centre) and their guide with his vehicle. Right: On the edge: sight-fishing for grilse in the Falls

It was mid August, with mild and breezy conditions. The weather in Iceland is famously unpredictable (I once titled a novel after it), so layered clothing is the order of the day. The Dölum doesn't require as much mountain-goatish scrambling around as certain other rivers and massive four-wheel-drive vehicles can cross the fords between runs. Chest waders and a staff are a must, however.

Methods range from tiny dressed Frances trebles to stripped surface lures, however—especially in lowish water—a high proportion of salmon are taken on the Portland Hitch. This involves looping a half-hitch behind the eye of the fly so that it rides up across the current at an angle and inscribes the surface along an attractive arc; fish often lunge at it with jaws agape and it requires intense concentration. This is sometimes termed 'technical fishing', although I'm never quite clear what other types there are.

Perhaps because they're nearer their marine feeding grounds, these sub-Arctic salmon can react to your fly more aggressively than their Scottish counterparts. Down on Pool 17, I had chosen a small Sunray with a touch of blue (the colour the warriors in the sagas wore when intent



‘Iceland salmon are like Iceland girls; even when you kiss them, you can't be sure of them’

on mayhem) and, as I swam it across the softer seam on the far side of the neck, a pretty little grilse smote it like the hammer of Thor and vengeance was mine. Back at the lodge, there were plenty of heartfelt toasts and, testing positive for Johnny Walker, I repaired to bed at a slight angle, like a Portland Hitch.

In its short, three-month summer season, the Dölum averages about 1,000 fish; this August, the runs were down, but, nevertheless, our party of six (hosted by the indomitable John Hotchkiss and including three generations of the Mitchell family) managed a creditable 20 in three days. My highlight was spotting a salmon

in the Foss and repeatedly throwing it a large *Snaelda* tube (I call this 'love bombing'). Up she came and it was no peck on the cheek this time; we became unofficially engaged.

Later that afternoon, I foolishly handed my rod to Neil and he pulled a fish out of a pool I had just covered. In true Viking style, I shook him warmly by the throat. And that's enough of my personal Laxdaela saga.

For further information about the Laxá in Dölum, telephone 00 354 577 2230 or email jon@hreggnasi.is or halli@hreggnasi.is. All tackle must be disinfected and certified by a vet or telephone the Tackle Disinfection Service on 020-3301 2699. For an excellent source of Icelandic fly patterns, visit www.fishingflies.is

David Profumo caught his first fish at the age of five and, off the water, he's a novelist and biographer. He lives up a glen in Perthshire, with a labrador who only understands Gaelic