



I see a pearl moon rising

The Prof enlists the help of a young guide called Sibbi in a quest to conquer salmon and sea trout, including the biggest fish landed on the Grimsa this season, on some of Iceland's most prolific rivers

Photographs by Glyn Satterley

RENOWNED for its volcanoes, Viking sagas and the defeat of the English soccer team, Iceland has a population roughly the size of Cardiff, but can boast nearly 100 salmon rivers. British sportsmen have been visiting since the 1880s and a favourite destination is the lovely Laxá í Kjos—a medium-sized 'first XI' river flowing through a verdant glacier-forged valley on the west coast. When I arrived this September, they had experienced a tough season, with a month of near drought. The water was weedy and pitifully low. 'It's been the Costa Kjos,' lamented Sibbi, my young guide. But we do like a challenge.

With more than 80 named pools of striking variety, from miniature canyons to long, pastoral meanders, the Kjos is sometimes called 'the salmon fisher's university'; if you learn to fish here, you'll acquire versatile skills that last forever. Graduates include Kevin Costner, Jack Hemingway and Mick Hucknall.

Depending on conditions, you might try multiple techniques in one day (this used to be Lobworm Central, but is now strictly fly only). You can swing a conventional wet fly, quickly retrieve a micro-treble, work a surface lure, such as the classic Sunray Shadow, 'chuck 'n' duck' a ponderous Cone Head or work the Riffing Hitch. The latter method involves a controlled skating of the fly to scratch an enticing V onto the stream and such visible offers effectively double your fun. The fish can be fickle and there are numerous currents to decipher and hidey-holes to explore.

As top English guide John Hotchkiss, who arranged our trip, told me, the river is also notable for its run of hefty sea trout. A delicate upstream nymph is used for these beauties and, often, you can sight-fish for them in the aquarially-clear water. Bring light tackle and your finest polarising glasses.

We thundered upstream the first morning in Sibbi's 4x4 and, despite

a Thor-hammer wind, we encountered fish in almost every pool. We tried Kambshylur and Skuggi, then, in gargling Stekkjarfljot (these Icelandic pool names sure do test the spellchecker), my Sunray was intercepted by two coloured fish, which I then disappointingly 'long-distance released'. On bouldery Kroarhamar, Sibbi called in the shots from atop a bridge parapet. He could see six salmon dawdling in an area the size of a card table. I missed the first, but nailed the second on a tiny Undertaker pattern.

In retrospect, four strikes in one morning looked semi-miraculous. An average season here produces some 1,300 fish, but, this year, they were just reaching 500. Those sea trout are a wonderful bonus, mind. On the last morning of our three days, Sibbi took me up to... let's call it Pool 35. Drifting my twin Bead Heads down below a cliff face, I saw the sight-indicator dither and I lifted

gently into a 7lb sea trout. Later, I made that a brace with a four-pounder. Those fish made my trip.

The guiding is first class, as is the modern lodge, with its panoramic riverine vista. The food is outstanding—you don't have a camp cook, but a 'celebrity' chef. Johan used to be butler to the Icelandic president and drives an orange Humvee. This salmon fisher's university is well worth attending.

However, next came the mighty Grimsa river, also once a haunt of Victorians. One military chap is remembered for polishing off four litres of whisky every day. The present lodge, spectacularly situ-

Guide Sibbi nets the author's 7lb sea trout from pool 35 of the Laxá í Kjos

‘The Kjos is sometimes called the salmon fisher's university’



Fishing the mighty Laxfoss below the lodge on the Grimsa river, with guide Doddi spying from atop the cliff

ated over the dramatic Laxfoss, is built in the angular 1970s style and was designed by the American angling author Ernest Schwiebert. Some nickname it 'the Elephant House', but it's an ideal base for roaming this enchanting river. Here, my American buddy Todd Warnock joined us and, immediately, battle commenced.

There had been a small freshet overnight and our first pool—Horrible—was actually too high. In days of yore, some farmers netting here allegedly trapped something truly monstrous that made its escape. Norse mythology conjures many horrors frequenting waterfalls; the distinctive 'wrist' on a salmon's tail is said to have resulted from Thor grasping the impish Loki, lurking in fishy form. Often, in Ultima Thule, you feel

you're casting deep into the nation's collective psyche. We went down to renowned Strengir—a series of runs that, in its heyday, yielded 500 fish in a season. My huge red Snaelda was snaffled four times and, at last, I had my first Grimsa fish—a small old stager, but hugely welcome.

It's an impressively long fishing day: kick-off is at 8am, with dinner at 10pm. As we approached Gardarfljot for our evening session, the wind dropped, a pearl moon rose and so did the fish. It was the witching hour, when occasionally all things conspire. Guide Doddi tied on a hitched Sunray tube and, almost at once, in the bulging golden light, it provoked salmon into porpoising and slashing as I retrieved. Too quick on the trigger, I missed three, but beached two

before our final run down. Swapping to an intermediate 'slime' line, I cast square into the gloaming and felt a jolting take to my single-hander. When we eventually slid him ashore, there lay a coppery 18-pounder, beaked like Punchinello: a real old grandpappy *storta*. He proved the largest fish off the Grimsa this season. Hotfoot from the airport, Todd had also caught fish, so there was extravagant celebration—although not quite the full seven pints. Air guitar continued into the early hours. Someone apparently saw the Northern Lights.

They call the Grimsa the 'Queen of Rivers' and she was magnanimous to me (I finished with 10 salmon in three days). Again, the variety of pools was delightful—from the upper meadowlands to

the basalt ledges of the foss—and, for every fish we graced, there were numerous other offers. I rose one fish seven times, then promptly lost him. If it's this exciting in late season, I can only imagine what the sport is like in prime time. Next year, Todd and I plan to find out.

David Profumo was a guest of the Hreggnasi Angling Club in Reykjavik (00 354 577 2230; www.hreggnasi.com). For further details, email Jon Thor Juliusson (jon@hreggnasi.is) or Haraldur Eiríksson (halli@hreggnasi.is). The season runs from June 20 to September 22

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.