Where dreams come true

After much head-scratching, Matt Harris comes up with a list of his favourite salmon waters worldwide

PHOTOGRAPHY: MATT HARRIS

The tiny Kverka River in north-eastern Iceland is a little-known but spectacular gem.
WHEN THE EDITOR asked me to put together a list of my favourite ten Atlantic salmon rivers, I knew the task would be almost impossible. There are so many fabulous rivers out there, across two continents and in a dozen countries, and even though I have been lucky enough to fish a fair number, I will only ever experience a tiny sample of them, so this is very much a list of personal favourites, rather than an attempt at an objective “league table”. There are some glaring omissions - rivers such as Russia’s Kharlovka and Eastern Litza, and Canada’s Petite Cascapedia are just three that I would give my eye-teeth to return to - but I’ve done my best to squeeze in the most memorable and suggest why you might want to fish there, too...

Matt Harris is a professional photographer whose fly-fishing images from all over the world have won numerous awards.

WENGE

Matt Harris with a beauty from Tormanen on the Upper Alta.

**Top Ten Atlantic Salmon Rivers**

Norway

Norway is blessed with a multitude of salmon streams - from tiny, little-known gems to some of the most famous and most spectacular rivers on earth. The rivers have become synonymous with trophy salmon, and if you know where to go, this beautiful country still offers the best chance of catching a real monster.

There are a million salmon rivers out there, each with its own unique strain of fish and its own singular character. But there is only ONE Atlantic salmon that attain such a remarkably high average size, and fish of 50 lb and above are caught every year from the river’s hallowed pools. Although not as prolific as it once was, due in no small part to the wretched hydro-electro dam that was somehow sanctioned in the 1980s, the upper river at Sautso is the quintessential Alta experience.

Traveling up the river to Sautso’s intimate little lodge in one of the Alta’s traditional wooden canoes, gazing up at the astonishing walls of the vast canyon that flank the river as you go, it is hard not to be seduced by the unique history and enchantment of this magical place. The Alta’s canyon is one of the deepest in Europe, and to fish the pools that flow through it in the white nights of the Arctic summer is a rare and special privilege. As you watch the fishENGE

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TOPTENATLANTICSALMONRIVERS —

THE GAULA – the “golden river” – is one of Europe’s most prolific salmon rivers. Its salmon are a handsome and powerful strain that have somehow adapted to run the river’s notorious Gaulfossen rapids – half a mile of formidable churning white water that separates the upper and lower river. The Gaula is the classic Norwegian salmon river – big, brawling rapids, give way to beautiful glassy pools, and when the sun is shining, the river sparkles with the golden hues that gave it its name. The Norwegian Fishing Club offers good holding water either side of the Gaulfossen, so that if the river is too high or cold to allow the fish to pass, rods can still fish productive water below the Foss. The river is big and rewards proficient speycasters. Gaula fish are hard-won and often very big. My mate Charles Barrett had a 33-pounder from the NFC’s waters two years ago and 40-pounders are caught most years.

FLIES
Hakan Nordling’s Templedog was born on the Gaula and it is devastatingly effective in various colours. Many stick with Black-and-Green, but my favourite is the Banana Fly. Mike Anderson’s dirty-yellow version that blends perfectly with the golds of the river to come out of nowhere and surprises the salmon into a mistake.

CONTACT
Per Arnesberg and Enrico Cristiani recently took over the NFC and have made sweeping changes, including a beautiful upgraded main lodge and the acquisition of some excellent new pools. Per and Enrico understand the needs of keen salmon-fishers and offer an excellent rotation system, giving anglers access to a different beat every six hours. This allows the rods to fish any time of day or night. You can stay in the lodge or in one of the private farms up and down the river and eat the excellent food at the lodge or cook yourself, keeping costs down and your time flexible. Contact Per or Enrico at www.nfc-online.com

Reisa

JUST TO the west of the Alta is another Norwegian gem. The Reisa may lack the reputation of her big sister over the hill, but this intimate and stunningly beautiful river can offer fish to rival even those of her more celebrated neighbour. Most years the river throws up a 50 lb fish or two, and the exquisitely picturesque valley and rugged canyon at the top of the river are as beautiful as anywhere you will ever cast a fly. Unlike Alta, the Reisa does offer reasonable access, and by staying at Reisastua Lodge, you can fish private pools on the lower and middle river, or hike up into the beguiling wilderness of the upper river with one of the lodge’s excellent and knowledgeable guides. The water is gin-clear and it is often possible to see huge salmon in the pools. Catching them is a different matter, but this river is one of only a small handful that offers the genuine chance of landing a real leviathan.

FLIES
The Reisa fish see your fly a mile off in the crystal-clear water, so go small and subtle: small, sparse Templedogs in black-and-silver with just a splash of blue or green are the way to go, with minimal flash. Fish long leaders and take big steps between casts so that you surprise the fish, and you may just find yourself attached to one of the river’s elusive monsters. The Reisa fish can also be tempted to grab a Bomber off the top, too.

CONTACT
Reisastua Lodge is a small, intimate lodge with a warm, informal atmosphere and a genuine charm. Its owner, Roar Olsen, is a wonderful character and a salmon-fishing nut. He knows the river well, has private access to some of the best pools and employs excellent guides. Roar’s catch-book is astonishing, with many of his clients, including my great friend and speycasting genius Scott Mackenzie, recording their personal best salmon here. Look no further. Contact Roar at: reisastua.no/Reisastua-Lodge.aspx

[Reisa]

[GAULA]
TO MANY European anglers, the rivers of eastern Canada are a little-known quantity. In the post-modern world of relatively cheap long-haul travel and the almost unlimited access to information that the Internet offers, I find this a baffling shame. Eastern Canada offers some absolutely sensational salmon fishing on some of the most beautiful rivers on earth.

[Restigouche]

OF ALL the Atlantic salmon rivers of Canada’s eastern seaboard, one river system stands head and shoulders above the rest in terms of the size and quality of its fish. The Restigouche is the A3 of New Brunswick – it is similarly fated as an almost impossibly exclusive river where Atlantic salmon of astonishing size are a genuine possibility. A fish of more than 68 inches long and reckoned to have weighed over 70 lb was caught on fly as recently as 1990. The Restigouche is a wide, stately river, and much of the fishing is done from canoes, although many pools can be fished with long speycasts from the bank. A number of the Restigouche’s tributaries offer the chance to target the river’s huge fish in more intimate wading situations. The Upsalquitch is one such. On this meandering serpentine stream the Restigouche system’s fabulous fish can be hunted at close quarters. Highly recommended.

FLIES

The crystal waters of the Restigouche system demand respect. Local flies - classic hairwings like the Nighthawk or Restigouche Dose - tied on single irons and fished on long and unnervingly light leaders are the way to go, with Bombers coming into their own in the low water of mid and late season.

CONTACT

There is very limited access to the Restigouche and its tributaries. Bunyemada Lodge on the main river and Two Brooks Lodge on the Upsalquitch are a rare treat, offering access to some of the very best fishing and a genuine taste of New Brunswick in beautifully appointed traditional accommodation. Those interested in fishing on this remarkable river system should contact Topher Brown at The Fly Fisher Group at: www.flyfishergroup.com

[ICELAND]

ICELAND’S SALMON rivers offer the opportunity to sight-fish for salmon in some of the most extraordinary landscapes on earth. Don’t expect to catch a monster – though large fish of 20 lb and over have been caught recently – but embrace the intimacy and rugged beauty of this country and you will experience salmon fishing like no other.

[Topher Brown and his guide on the Restigouche’s beautiful tributary, the Upsalquitch.]

[Topher Brown and guide at Camp Bonaventure.]

[THE GASPE] peninsular, on the south shore of the great St Lawrence seaway, is peppered with stunningly beautiful salmon rivers. Perhaps the most special is the sparkling, gin-clear Bonaventure. The “Bonnie” is everything that a salmon river should be – impossibly clear water that tumbles into inviting riffles and gleams over deep, slate-bedded pools. The water is so clear that it is genuinely possible to spot the fish holding in all but the deepest pools, and many anglers fish only when they have spotted a target. Late in the season, the salmon stack up in the deepest, coolest pools and can be targeted with dry-flies, but my favourite time is the early season, when the river is full of big, fresh fish; broad-shouldered, chrome silver and full of spectacular, high-flying acrobatics. Ensuring a mint- silver 18-pounder on a riffle-hitched Sunray from this picture-perfect river with my great mate and speycasting guru Topher Brown is a favourite memory.

FLIES

The Bonaventure fish respond to surface flies in all but the coldest water. Hitched Sunrays work well on most rivers on the Gaspe, and the Bonaventure is no exception. Other local favourites include the Pompier, the Picasse and the Stoney.

CONTACT

Glenn Legrande’s beautiful and luxurious Camp Bonaventure is the perfect way to experience the magic of the “Bonnie”. Glenn’s lodge is beautifully fitted out, the food is great and his guides are among the most experienced on the river. Contact Glenn via his website at: www.campbonaventure.com

[Sunray from this picture-perfect river with my great mate and speycasting guru Topher Brown is a favourite memory.]

[THE KVÉRKA] is a number of undiscovered gems in the country’s far north-eastern corner. The Kverka is a tributary of the Hafrafjöllssand, and it is one of the wildest and most spectacularly rugged places I have ever fished for salmon. The Hafrafjöllssand is special, but when it blows out due to rain, it’s time to drive up into the astonishingly beautiful valley of the Kverka and work your way into the canyon, where the fish are piling into the spate-swollen river. Crouching on all fours and listening to the advice from your guide on the walkie-talkie as he pears into the pool from a bluff high above is a unique and exhilarating way to fish for salmon. This is not so much salmon fishing as salmon hunting. It is utterly addictive.

FLIES

Yet again, my favourite fly is a hitched Sunray, and the fish will come up for this fly again and again if it is presented quietly and accurately. Failing that, a small conehead fralonsa and the Kverka very well and can advise on all aspects of fishing these two gems. Contact Pete via The Fly Fisher Group at: www.flyfishergroup.com

[Jim Gallivan and guide Tómas at Camp Bonaventure.]

[Contact Pete via The Fly Fisher Group at: www.flyfishergroup.com]

www.trekt-and-salmon.co.uk  |  December 2014  33
FEW IF any rivers on earth have a run of Atlantic salmon to match the Poni, on the eastern end of the Kola Peninsula. My friend David Profumo eloquently described the Poni experience as being “akin to salmon fishing in the Middle Ages”, and after fishing the hard-fished fish farm-and-net-ravaged waters of our homeland, it is both depressing and astonishing to witness just how good salmon fishing can be if the fish are left alone and allowed to flourish. It’s hard not to catch fish on the Poni – I pulled out a trio of silver stunners on a long speycast in many places, and the river offers fish of a bigger average size, numbers of fish on offer, the Ponoi – most are between 8 lb and 14 lb, with the odd 20-pounder if you are very lucky – but you should look forward to a million thrills and spills with hundreds of hard-fighting fish that will have you scanning your fly-box for something that doesn’t work.

FLIES

Anything - fish on the surface in all but the coldest weather for maximum visual sport.

CONTACT

The Poni books up fast, so contact Tarquin Millington-Orrake at Frontiers as soon as possible. Visit: www.frontierrivr.co.uk

THE VARZINA is situated on the Kola’s northern coast, a little to the west of the Yoshanka, and while the Yoshanka is a wild, raging river, the Varzina is a much smaller, more manageable, proposition. The river is an absolute pearl – both banks can comfortably be covered with a long spey cast in many places, and the river rivals the Aberdeenshire Dee in terms of the classic fly-water on offer. Don’t be fooled by the river’s size, however. The Varzina can throw up huge fish, and the salmon that run it are beautifully proportioned and fighting fit.

Fish of over 30 lb are a possibility: my great mate Rod Murphy had a stunning 31-pounder a few years ago, and Sir Seaton Will’s fish from the seapool, measuring a stupendous 57 inches, is still reckoned to be one of the biggest ever landed on the Kola peninsula. The Varzina lodge sits right by the spot that marks the start of the tidal water, and after supper, anglers can wander down to Golden pool and Silver pool and fish for big sea-iced salmon straight off the tide. I managed five fish to 25 lb in a three-hour session here on one special night in midsummer, 2009, and each fish went racing back to the salt with a wild abandon that is emblematic of the river itself. Another way to spend your evening is to stroll up to Hounglass pool as the midnight sun winks through the silver birch trees, and hopefully you’ll arrive just in time for a tussle with a big silver fish in this fabulous little boxing-ring of a pool.

The Varzina’s little sister, the Drozdovka, is, if anything, even more beguiling: a tiny stream that plays host to staggeringly big fish. I got a sea-iced 31 lb out of this cascading jewel one afternoon, and covered two fish on the same day that I swear were 10 lb heavier.

FLIES

The Varzina seems to respond well to the black, gold and yellow flies, and the favourite Golden Killer is a simple variation on this theme. Sunsets are as, ever, also hugely effective, while the Snelaks is deadly in the high, cold water of early winter.

CONTACT

Matt McHugh at Fly Odyssey organises prime weeks with experienced host and hugely knowledgeable guide Sean Clarke. Visit: www.flyodyssey.co.uk

**[ Varzina and the Drozdovka ]**
SCOTLAND
A NATION whose inspiring rivers run deep with the history of the sport but where, sadly, salmon numbers have crashed as a result of government neglect. And yet in spring, when the stream sparkles and your fly swings just so, is there any place you would rather be?

DESPITE THE myriad issues facing many of our home rivers, there remains a magical quality about the Spey that continues to cast a powerful spell. I still love to fish the hallowed waters of what Richard Waddington famously described as “The King of Rivers”: few if any rivers are such a delight to fish. The Spey’s brisk, lively current and its majestic setting are as alluring as ever, and the fish, while undoubtedly scarcer than they once were, are still as sleek and as beautiful as ever.

As I sit in the Fochabers Hotel, sipping a good dram and a pint of Eighty Shilling, and chatting with Blair Banks, a young gillie whose professional future depends upon the sustainability of a good sport fishery on the river, I couldn’t be happier. We’ve just watched a lovely lithe springer swim off strongly after a good tussle in the Dipple pool, on the Brae Water’s excellent Beat 5, and all is right with the world.

Yet it would be foolhardy to pretend that all is well on this iconic stream: the incumbent Scottish government’s refusal to address the issue of drastically declining salmon populations and its short-sighted and wrecklessly indiscriminate support for commercial netting, intensive farming methods and fish-farming means that the salmon runs on this and many of the other great rivers of our sport’s proud motherland are in mortal danger. Many of Scotland’s great rivers are a shadow of their former selves and the younger generation of salmon-fishers are increasingly looking elsewhere for their sport, potentially wreaking havoc on the local economies based around the fishing on these once-great rivers.

We must do all we can to stop rivers like the Spey – great national treasures that are the envy of the fly-fishing world – becoming the victims of cheap, short-term politicking and cynical vested interests.

When the salmon are gone, they really are gone, for all time. Our rivers should be up there with the very best. That, after all, is where they belong.

FLIES
When the river is in ply, the Cascade is all you need on the Spey. Tie it sparse and fish it high in the water in all but the coldest, heaviest flows. In early season, the classic Black-and-Yellow may serve you better, and at the end of the season, a stripped Sunray might just stir up the big stale fish languishing in the slower pools.

CONTACT
The Brae Water offers five beats of cracking fly-water. Contact: The Estate Office, Gordon Castle, Fochabers. Tel: 01343 820 244. Web: www.gordoncastle.co.uk

TOP Fishing down a classic run on the lower Spey.