TUMBLING FOSSA

Peter Gathercole fishes one of Iceland’s mighty rivers, famous for its big browns, char and waterfalls.

Words & pictures: Peter Gathercole
ICELAND is a country celebrated for its rugged beauty - volcanoes, glaciers, gyers and waterfalls are all part of the mix. If that weren’t enough, it also offers some of the very best flyfishing to be had - anywhere. Its waters abound with brown trout, char and salmon in locations that really do have to be seen to be believed and the River Fossá is one prime example. A tumble of rocky gorges, pools and glides makes it one of the most dramatic rivers I have fish ed.

The River Fossá is situated 135km east of Reykjavik - Iceland’s capital. It carves its way through a valley between two mountain ranges of which the highest peak is Hekla, one of Iceland’s most active volcanoes.

Successful Flies

The trout season lasts from May until the end of September. Prime months are June, July and August when insect life becomes more active. Though there are relatively few aquatic insect species in Iceland, both brown trout and char feed readily at the surface during a hatch of black midge or a fall of terrestrial. Dry fly fishing is very productive with patterns such as the Black Gnat and Black F-Fly in sizes 12-14 being the productive with patterns such as the Black Gnat and Black F-Fly in sizes 12-14 being the most effective.

The salmon season runs from July through until September. The first trickle of salmon begins in July with the numbers increasing into August and September. The Fossá is a late season river so September is actually the best month though the end of August can also be good.

Foss is the Icelandic for waterfall, a word that perfectly describes this river. Three waterfalls punctuate its course one of which, Háifoss, situated at the top of the trout beat, is at 113 meters, the second highest in Iceland. When in full flow being anywhere near Háifoss is a truly awe-inspiring experience. Even more so when fishing right beneath its cascade as flyfishing guide Gummi Atli Asgeirsson and I did on a previous trip.

But this is a year later. The river is in superb condition and, though a little early in the season, Gummi has high hopes that we will get to see the Fossá and its trout at their best. Our party includes Gummi and me plus Benoit De Vilminor, an affable if excitable Parisian writer and filmmaker who had been fishing for salmon with Gummi the previous week.

In the absence of a hatch, big lures accounted for some very fine brown trout. All fish caught were returned safely back to their watery home.

How our session begins

We start at Háifoss, the second of Fossá’s waterfalls. Though not as high as Háifoss this waterfall is still incredibly impressive with its double cascade plunging into a deep rock-strewn pool. The water is beautifully clear but icy cold. It’s still quite early in the season especially by Icelandic standards so there’s little in the way of fly life in evidence.

We work our way downstream toward the confluence of the Fossá and the big glacial river into which it flows. Apart from seeing a few small fish rising in the shallows and spooking a couple of better fish we have little to show for our efforts. Out of the main gorge the river widens and softens. Hard black rock and heather gives way to grassy banks, interspersed by ferns and moors. This is the lower part of the river Gummi had seen rising confidently on the far side of the river. Gummi aims to get well into the main gorge of the Fossá and its trout at their best. Our party includes Gummi and me plus Benoit De Vilminor, an affable if excitable Parisian writer and filmmaker who had been fishing for salmon with Gummi the previous week.

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Out of the main gorge the river widens and softens. Hard black rock and heather gives way to grassy banks, interspersed by ferns and the striking blue of flowering lupins. All three of us fish this lower part of the river for well over an hour to little effect. Gummi is determined to catch fish and takes a hike upstream to a spot we had passed by to see if he could find anything. A while later he tells us he’s found some big char rising about half a mile upstream.

A drift-free drift is tricky

Carefully he begins to cast, lengthening line until the fly is drifting over the right spot. Not wanting to be left out Benoit and I shout instructions as to how the fly has landed and whether a fish is, indeed, looking at it. Even with Gummi having waded so close,
To reach char, Gummi does some severe wading. Presenting a fly accurately and without drag is still tricky. As so often happens the fish are rising just on the edge of the main flow where any small insects are funnelled conveniently into their path. The problem is that, if the fly-line catches the main current, the fish is dragged unnaturally fast and refused by the fish. Gummi’s ploy is to keep the cast short and the rod high so as little line as possible is on the water. After a good deal of frustration, the team effort finally pays off when a good fish gently sips down the CdC-winged fly. Feeling the hook, it quickly shoots off downstream, a dangerous time when using a light leader but luckily Gummi seems to be well in control. As the fish hits the surface we can see Gummi’s assertion is correct. It’s a char and a good one, at least four pounds, possibly nearer five.

The fish – which I was absolutely sure was a trout – proceeds to take its time, showing no desire to play. As the line tightens Gummi is playing a good char and is keeping it on the line. As the fish begins to tire, five pounds seems possible. But after a couple of fish at best. But the larger, deeper pools produce either nothing or a couple of fish at best. But the larger, deeper ones are far more prolific. The trout are quite superb – heavily marked with black spots and often with a scattering of red ones thrown in for good measure. They also fight incredibly hard.

It’s a ploy that repays our efforts as the smaller pools produce either nothing or a couple of fish at best. But the larger, deeper ones are far more prolific. The trout are quite superb – heavily marked with black spots and often with a scattering of red ones thrown in for good measure. They also fight incredibly hard. Considering the fast flowing water, the fish do not simply shoot off following the current but instead bore deep and, at times, press upstream even under heavy pressure. The effective tactic is to use a weighted lure, fished on a floating or sink-tip line. As the Fossá is not a hard-fished river, the pattern doesn’t seem to matter that much, with such clear water, a change of colour is needed after a fish or two has been caught in order to elicit another solid take. Various Zonker-style flies work well as do Olive Tadpoles with a nice big tungsten gold bead at the front. Patterns with no finesse by casting slightly upstream then mending the line to get it right to the end of the swing when the lure is almost directly downstream just before it enters the shallow dead water on the near bank.

If a take is felt at any point during the retrieve it’s worth letting the lure hang for a second or two before lifting off to re-cast. Having fished a particular pool really hard and all three of us catching a tidy number of fish, Gummi has one last trick up his sleeve. He quickly switches to a fast sinking line along with a lure more horrible than his Angel Hair creation. On goes a large olive Tadpole fished on a floating line as possible is on the water. As the retrieve begins, Gummi sets his Angel Hair creation. On goes a large olive Tadpole with a nice big tungsten gold bead at the front. The lure twitching across the pool. The majority of the takes come at two distinct points. The first is as the lure begins to lift at the end of its downstream drift. The second is as the end of the swing when the lure is almost directly downstream just before it enters the shallow dead water on the near bank.

After a dour bottom-hugging tussle, the fish is brought to hand. Gummi casts it into the head of the pool, mending the line to get it right to the bottom. Given that the fish had been refusing more sombre hued patterns and had been covered repeatedly, I can’t believe that this orange thing will work, especially in such clear water. I’m wrong, of course. Soon the line tightens, the rod lifts into a steep curve and Gummi is playing a good fish. The fight is different from that of the browns we’d caught – more slow and solid. A few minutes later the reason is clear. A few moments upstream, the fish hits the surface and a flash of orange gives the game away. It’s a char and a good one. It weighs over five pounds – a fine specimen. It has been a testing though successful day’s fishing. The only regret is that we hadn’t experienced its great dry fly and nymph fishing due to conditions. It’s a missed opportunity given the quality of the fish and the location. This was my second visit – the first it was in flood. So it could be third time lucky?

A lost fish
After a protracted if unspectacular fight everything seems to be going to plan, when the hook pulls. No drama, no sudden line-breaking surge. The fish – which I was looking forward to photographing – has simply gone. And so we head upstream, back towards the main gorge to work quickly through some of the smaller pools, taking more time to explore the larger, deeper ones. This is made possible in the time we have thanks to Gummi’s 4x4 vehicle with its massive wheels, which enables us to hop from pool to pool almost the entire length of the river. The same journey can be made on foot as there are plenty of spots in the Fossá’s meandering path shallow enough to be crossed. It will just take a great deal longer.

By casting slightly upstream then mending the line at least once or twice, the lure can clearly be fished right along the bottom where the fish are sitting. As the line tightens in the current, a series of short strips keeps the lure twitching across the pool. The majority of the takes come at two distinct points. The first is as the lure begins to lift at the end of its downstream drift. The second is as the end of the swing when the lure is almost directly downstream just before it enters the shallow dead water on the near bank.

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