



The world's
BEST
brown trout rivers?

Iceland is better known for salmon fishing, but it has truly fantastic brown trout sport. **Peter Gathercole** investigates... »

THINK of Iceland and you think of salmon fishing, perhaps some of the best in the world but at eye-watering prices. But there is also very good fishing for brown trout and Arctic char on both rivers and lakes, fortunately at much more affordable prices.

While the fishing is quite special, so is the terrain. Iceland is a land of superlatives: it boasts one of Europe's largest glaciers, most powerful waterfalls and most active volcanoes. What's more, the country sits right on top of the Mid Atlantic Ridge where the land masses of North America and Europe meet in the most spectacular way.

Just as in the UK, Iceland's spring this year was cold and late – and dry. Well, that all changed as I headed east toward three of Iceland's top trout and char rivers with Gudmundur Atli Ásgeirsson my guide and companion for the trip. Our destination was the Hólá River, a meandering water situated in farming country. The river supports a good head of brown trout but our target was to be its population of Arctic char.

Char are simply stunning fish. The males, when in spawning condition, sport bright orange flanks and white edged fins. Normally on this river they range from 2lb to 4lb but occasionally get close to double-figures. Interestingly they are often caught on very small, weighted flies.

Unfortunately my first visit to the Hólá was not a success. Gummi, as Gudmundur is usually known, informed me that the river was too high and coloured for successful char fishing. It was the price we paid for the otherwise welcome rain, which had been falling incessantly since my arrival. On the plus side we managed to return a few days later when the river was still quite high and carrying a little colour but certainly fishable.

Gummi's experience came into play and he quickly spotted a few good fish sitting close in. Unfortunately there was heavy cloud cover so it wasn't bright enough to see the fish well enough to spot if any had taken the fly so we both set up with a small indicator on the line. Under it we used two tiny bead head nymphs positioned about a foot apart. They were simple patterns, little more than a couple of layers of black or brown thread with a gold bead at the head. They certainly worked and we managed to catch our char – good fish, which, like most char, fought incredibly hard.

The following day Gummi and I met up



Peter fishes the Minnivallalaekur river with the volcano Mount Hakla in the background.

with Eiríkur and Gardar, two of his friends and fellow guides, for a couple of days on two more spectacular but very different rivers. Our first stop was the Fossá River situated in quite breathtaking scenery and a place that has just been opened up for brown trout and salmon fishing. That was the good news.

All three of my companions were incredibly excited at the chance to fish this fantastic river known to contain some very big trout. The bad bit was that, as we drew close, it was evident that the river at the spot where Gummi wanted to fish

F-Fly

Hook: Size 14-16 (formerly 15-17)
TMC103
Thread: Primrose
14/0 Sheer
Abdomen:
Orvis dry fly
Spectrablend dubbing
No.64 olive brown
Wing: Natural CdC
Thorax: Hare's fur



was coloured and quite unfishable. The heavy rain experienced on my arrival had taken its toll.

Undeterred we headed off upstream to another spot above a main tributary that Gummi decided was the cause of the coloured water. If the first section I saw was spectacular the upper reaches of the Fossá were simply breathtaking.

We parked the vehicle above a massive waterfall. As the others got out and began tackling up I wasn't entirely sure they weren't having me on. But no, we were going to descend to the river far below and try to catch a trout – all of us. The river carved a path through a deep rock-strewn gorge and as we negotiated the steep path I took the odd moment to admire the scenery and catch my breath – I needed to.

I'd love to say that all the effort resulted in some impressive trout but it didn't. One hooked and lost. But what I did experience was flyfishing under the most incredible waterfall – something I will never forget. Having finally reached the vehicle again, we set off for Minnivallalaekur our final destination, which has been called by some the best brown trout river in the world.

We arrived by late evening, our accommodation being a beautiful timber-built lodge right on the river bank. Sipping a welcome beer, we sat watching the odd trout rise looking forward to a meal, a good rest and an opportunity to fish this famous river the following morning.

The beat we were on accommodates four rods so Gummi and I set off downstream while Eiríkur and Gardar stayed close to the lodge. Using >>



Eiríkur plays his best fish weighing 6lb.

“Having finally reached the vehicle again, we set off for Minnivallalaekur our final destination, which has been called the best brown trout river in the world.”



A quick photograph before release.



Gardar's fish was 74cm long, possibly weighing 10lb in peak condition.



Gardar ponders fly selection.

TRAVEL: ICELAND



Arctic char are very handsome fish.

Polaroids we quickly spotted a few good trout finning away in the current. Often one would chink to the side – a flash of white from its mouth a sure sign that it was feeding on nymphs.

I sat and watched as Gummi covered a couple of fish with a small weighted nymph but the fish weren't having any of it. He decided to fish midstream so headed back to the vehicle to get an indicator. I kept my eye on a good trout feeding only three yards from the bank. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a movement a little further out. To my amazement what had caught my eye was a huge fish, which looked as if it would be well into double-figures. Slowly it worked upstream picking off the odd nymph as it went. I tried to keep it in view until Gummi arrived but by then it had slipped out of sight. I never saw it again.

I left Gummi to it and wandered up to the top of the run where a small pool cut into the right bank forcing the current into a curve. All along this section fish were rising and some of them, judging by the width of their shoulders, weighed four or five pounds at least. Quickly I tucked in under the bank so the fish wouldn't see me then crept as close as I dared. At times like this I think it a good idea to sit and watch for a moment. With so many fish rising in shallow water it would be easy to spook them with a hasty cast.

The big problem though was that the larger fish were working away at the top of the pool. Sitting low close to the river's surface I could see great backs bulging as they took whatever food the current was bringing their way. Casting upstream could mean that I frighten the fish closer to me or even if they took the fly the ensuing fight would send the bigger fish upstream.

I flicked a size 14 Black Gnat a few feet above the fish closest to me. It didn't even look. I tried again and again, this time to a fish slightly further upstream but with exactly the same result. Even

The Fossá river has the most breathtaking scenery and waterfalls.



“Looking closely at the river’s surface I saw a stream of tiny black midges drifting down.”



After breaking the surface, it was obvious just how long Gardar's fish was!

though there were at least eight fish rising it was impossible to see exactly what they were taking.

Looking closely at the river's surface I saw a stream of tiny black midges drifting down. This had to be the cause of the rise. Quickly I rummaged around in my collection of river dry flies and found a size 20 Black F-Fly. If this didn't work I hadn't a clue what else to try.

In my haste to catch a fish I forgot my plan to target those big fish. The cast landed halfway up the pool and as the fly drifted down it was taken by the first fish it reached. I lifted the rod; the hooked fish bolted upstream and with it those big fish too. Even though I was playing a nice 2.5lb brown I kicked myself for my lack of patience.

My chance had gone. After slipping the fish back I waited a while but nothing much more occurred. Admitting defeat I carried on upstream picking up a couple of similar sized fish, which were rising tight in against the near bank.

We headed downstream to where the river meanders through rolling pasture providing grazing for a herd of Icelandic horses. With

Mount Hekla, one of the world's most famous and active volcanoes, as a backdrop it made a stunning location to cast a line. It last erupted in 2000 when it looked far different from the almost gentle snow capped giant I witnessed. It was made all the better when we found another very large brown, which again I was unable to fool.

Heavy showers sent us back to the lodge for an early supper. After a quick meal Eiríkur and Gardar headed to the stretch Gummi and I had fished that morning. I hardly noticed they'd gone when Gummi got a call – Eiríkur had hooked a big fish. I picked up the camera and ran.

Fortunately by the time I got there Eiríkur was still playing the fish. It had taken a big buoyant fly skated over a fast midstream run – something of a contrast with my size 20 F-Fly. As it was drawn into the shallows we could see it was a big male brown weighing around 6lb. A few pictures taken, the fish was unhooked and carefully released.

I'd hardly had time to draw breath when there was a shout from Gardar. He'd been fishing a large flat section of the river upstream of the

bridge used to access our bank. Using a small nymph and an indicator he managed to latch into something that looked very big indeed.

As the trout broke surface the distance between its tail and dorsal fin was immense but while the fight was strong it was nowhere near as dramatic as Eiríkur's fish. Eventually Gardar made to our bank and got his hand around the base of the trout's tail. Lifting it clear of the water we could see it was a very long fish, but it was definitely on the thin side. Before being slipped back we measured the fish's length – it was 74cm. Later I checked a reputable length to weight conversion chart and in its prime this trout could have weighed almost 10lb.

It was an incredible conclusion to a great trip. It was a lesson that even in Iceland, where big fish are the norm the weather is a major factor in successful fishing. ↵



How to book fishing

Season: April 1 – September 30. May to July are the best months.

Tackle: 4-6 weight rods with floating line. Dry fly and nymphs including sedge, and midge imitations are effective. Black terrestrial patterns also work well. A pair of Polaroids helps to spot fish when fishing nymphs.

Getting there: Iceland Air fly every day from Heathrow. A return flight starts from approximately £250 depending on the time of year.

Contact: Gudmundur Atli Ásgeirsson **Tel:** +354-8446900

Email: info@flyfishinginiceland.com

Web: www.flyfishinginiceland.com



Typical accommodation.

Eiríkur poses with his best fish.

