

Fishing? She's Hooked

The first time I ever landed a trout, I was actually trying to land a fella.

I was 20, and this tall, dark creature offered to take me fishing. Wonderful, I thought, just the two of us cuddled up together under an umbrella. A lot could happen up a mountain, beside a river, under an umbrella.

But, of course, he gave me a cursory lesson in casting, then left me at the bottom of the valley while he climbed upstream and out of sight.

I flicked disconsolately at the river and a wretched trout jumped out of the river and hooked itself.

I yelled for help, to no avail of course, and so I did what I've done many times since, and which no good fisherman ever does, and dropped the rod, grabbed the line and hauled in the fish.

I pretty well forgot about fishing after that until, about 15 years ago, a friend told me he was going fishing on the Spey with Gordon Baxter, of jam and pickled beetroot fame.

I said: "Really? Gordon has been inviting me for years and I've always wriggled out of it."

"Wriggled out of it? Out of fishing on the Spey? On the Ballindolloch beat? In the Junction pool? In September?"

I realised then that turning down supper at Buckingham Palace, cooked by Gordon Ramsay, would have been a lesser idiocy.

So the next year I accepted. I was taught by Commander Wilson, and I caught a fish on my first afternoon in the Junction pool. And I have blessed the extraordinary Gordon Baxter ever since. I still dream of him, 86 now and fishing most days, in old-fashioned waders, half into the river on a steep bank, effortlessly Spey-casting a line so long, straight and perfect it makes you weep.

So of course I'm hooked, and have been fishing every summer since, in Scotland, Iceland, Montana – and once in Norway, on the Aa with my brother Jamie.

We arrived to find the lodge full of men with tellingly battered kit. Two of them, a Norwegian and a Swede, looked vaguely familiar.

Jamie rumbled them first. One was Sweden's champion fly-fisherman, and the other was Norway's. We'd seen their pictures in the Roxton Bailey Robinson catalogue. And there they were again, not just in person, but in the fishing mags lying about the lodge. Rather like going for a golfing weekend and finding you are sharing a gaff with Nicklaus and Woods.

It got worse. Next day our ghillie appeared, and he turned out to be Norway's champion fly-tier, who earned his fishing by teaching idiots like us to cast.

But it was the first week of the season, the water was 5ft too high, it came off the mountain in a white-water torrent, and everyone was agreed that no fish were to be had. So Jamie and I had a lovely day, relaxed, no danger of hooking anything, learning to cast with a heavy sinking line and one of those Christmas decorations on the end of it that the Norwegians call flies.

By the way, have you ever met a ghillie who deigned to put one of your flies on the line? In Montana they sell you different flies for every creek. In Iceland the Vikings wave away your elegant Hairy Mary's and understated Munro Killers and insist on small cuddly toys in Day-Glo colours.

And Norway is no different. My new friend Arild Fredriksen having explained that "Norwegian fish won't take ze Scottish flies", proceeds to sell me his newly invented, electric-hued flies, "What are they called?" I ask. He says he hasn't named them yet, but if I catch a fish in this water, he'll name them after me.

So, of course, that's just what happens. Must be the pheromones. After supper I take my rod and continue with the casting practise. I don't bother with waders and boots since I'm not really fishing.

Everyone else, except Mikael Frodin, Sweden's champ, goes to bed.

Next thing I'm into a fish and it's a whopper and fighting like the Devil, and I am yelling at Mikael across the river – of course he can't hear a thing above the noise of the rapids above us and the weir below. I can't let my fish run because it will go over the weir. Soon my arm is

aching and I'm too out of breath to yell anymore. Then I notice Mikael has clocked me and he's standing, hand on hip thinking: "Not worth going upstream, over the bridge and down to her. Stupid cow is going to lose it any minute."

But after a bit he relents, and comes with a net, and I eventually land this perfect, perfect bar of silver, fresh new fish, a yard long and weighing 24 lb.

Because my beautiful fish is a hen fish, we have to let her go. But first she had to endure being weighed and measured and photographed and inspected by the entire village, who had all come out at the news of the first fish of the season.

At one point I realised that all the photographs were going to be of Mikael, with my fish in the net. So I jumped in the river to get into the frame, quite forgetting I was waderless. But I was out so of my skull with excitement I didn't feel the freezing water. When someone asked me how long it had taken me to land the fish, I said: "Five minutes, maybe seven". Mikael tells me it was at least 25. That's what pleasure does for you.

Which explains why framed in my loo is a huge green Christmas tassel with silver stripes and orange underbelly called the Green Prudence. There is an Orange Prudence and a Yellow Prudence too. Oh, the glory of it!

I'm not generally so lucky. Once, fishing in Iceland, I'd caught nothing for a week. Neither had Max Hastings, who was my fishing partner. He was mighty grumpy because he was convinced the wormers, who were fishing ahead of us, were catching our fish. I refused the offers of the wormers in our party (Icelanders to a man) to swap a fly for a bunch of worms. Until the last afternoon that is.

Determined I should kill a fish, two of them held me, one on each side, and marched me into the middle of the raging Vididalsa, under a waterfall, where the torrent was so strong I'd have been a goner without them. And pretty soon we had a fish. They then frogmarched me, sideways, to the bank. At the last minute, when my fish was half out of the water in the shallows, it slipped the leash and made a leap for freedom. But those wormers were not having any of that. One of them rugby-tackled it, clutched it to his belly and lay on it until the other got it by the tail.

I had done almost nothing, but I'm not proud. The fish went in the book as mine, and I took him home and ate him.

I have a poor history of getting my fish home. Once Alan Parker, the founder of Brunswick PR and a fishing host as generous as Gordon, undertook to bring my booty back from Iceland for me, and every time I inquired he said they were in his freezer and he'd deliver them one day. Then the freezer went off and no one noticed. Men from the Council in white space-suits had to come and take it all away. And, once, on Alan's beat on the Tay, the fancy fishing hotel that undertakes to get your fish smoked and sent on to you, never did so. Every time I go there and pay £15 for a plate of smoked salmon I wonder what unfortunate fisherman has kindly, if inadvertently, sponsored it.

Never mind. Next year I know the water will be neither too high, nor too low, the grilse will be back, and those glorious fish will take my flies and kindly not spit them out. And if they do, I'll even forgo the pleasure of cooking and eating them and let them go.