

ПОНОЙ



Stairway to heaven

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The Kola Peninsula in Russian Lapland is host to a myriad of fabulous salmon rivers. I cut my teeth catching summer grilse on the wide, bounteous waters of the Varzuga almost ten years ago, before graduating to the roughhouse rivers of the northern coast.

One river has continued to intrigue me, however - anglers lucky enough to have visited it seem to always talk in hushed reverential tones about the huge river on the far eastern tip of the peninsula. The Ponoï is the largest river on the Kola, flowing over 250 miles across the arctic tundra, before disgorging into the Barents Sea. It cannot boast the titanic leviathans of the northern rivers, but it can provide almost indecent numbers of good-sized fish in the spring and Summer, and it does have one very special ace up its sleeve. Every Autumn, as the leaves start to yellow and the dark frosty arctic nights return, the legendary "osaynkas" start to run the river. As the Northern lights start to splash their eerie magic across the tundra, these remarkable salmon hunker down to brave the entire savage polar winter under the ice. They stay in the river for the following year, spawning in the autumn, before spending another Winter under the ice. Finally, the next spring, a remarkable twenty months after they first entered the river, the spent fish descend the river as kelts, sometimes returning to spawn a second and occasionally even a third time. Any salmon angler will tell you that salmon don't feed in fresh water, which means that these astonishing creatures go for the best part of two years without eating anything - instead, they pack on the pounds out at sea, romping into the river through August and September as fabulous deep silver bullets ready for their epic stay.



As I sat drinking a beer with a good mate of mine, former Ponoï guide and spey-casting guru, Bill Drury, one evening, watching his twinkling blue eyes light up as he reminisced about how these big silver freight trains can all but rip the rod from your hand, I resolved to experience the Ponoï "fall run" for myself.

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Joining Bill's group in the last week in August, I found myself experiencing once again that sudden rush that Kola regulars will know: stuffing the earplugs in and grinning back at the other excited anglers like kids on Christmas morning as the big mi-8 helicopter whisked us away from the grizzly, grey concrete of Murmansk and out across the endless tundra to the river.

Bill had put together a very special group, and I felt an instant sense of warmth and camaraderie amongst the anglers, all hardly daring to pinch themselves as we suddenly saw the sinuous curves of the Ponoï snaking across the tundra for the first time. This "brothers of the angle" thing never left us: from the moment we skipped down the legendary "Stairway to Heaven", the wooden walkway that descends from the helicopter pad into the camp, until, with heavy hearts, we bade each and every member of Ryabaga camp a big "das vidanya", every member of the party seemed filled with an exuberance and generosity of spirit that made every moment of the trip a real pleasure.



Ryabaga camp is famous for engendering this special atmosphere, and the astonishing attention to detail goes a long way to ensuring that all the anglers seem to be perpetually grinning like Cheshire cats. Not for nothing has the camp earned the soubriquet "The Ponoï Hilton", yet all the fabulous food, excellent guides, roaring wood fires and chocolates on your pillow count for diddy squat if the fishing doesn't deliver.

So how was it?

Well, I won't bore you with numbers - because you simply couldn't describe the numbers as boring! In six days fishing, twenty rods managed an incredible 661 fish, almost all of them multiple sea-winter fish between 8 and 21 pounds. Admittedly, a good few of the fish were overwintered from the previous year or summer-run residents - tartan-coloured crocodiles that were strong, dogged fighters - but the majority, a remarkable 356 of them, were what we came for: mint-silver, sea-liced savages straight from the sea.

Did Bill over-egg the pudding when describing the fighting prowess of these autumn runners?

Not a bit of it - in fact I think Billy - a Scotsman of course - was a little stingy with those eggs. I've been lucky enough to catch my share of salmon, not to mention the much feted steelhead of the Dean River in British Columbia and the knuckle-busting sea-run brown trout of Tierra Del Fuego: while I'd admit they can't compete with the giant brutes of the Kharlovka and Yokanga for raw, unstoppable power, pound for pound, a hot sea-liced Ponoï osankha in the mid-teens rampaging off down the river is as wild as it gets in fresh water.

My introduction to these magical fish was initially slow. I was teamed up with Mike Gawtre, a talented American angler from Maine, whose quick wit and easy-going nature made him a delight to fish with. On the first day, we were unfortunate to draw one of the up-river beats, where the fresh fish had yet to arrive in numbers. We fished hard from bank and boat, and managed a few decent-sized stale fish that gave a good honest account of themselves, but the main act - the autumn runners - were conspicuous by their absence.

We got back to camp, feeling just a little deflated, and decided to repair for an icy beer in the bar. We were met by a maelstrom of wide-eyed, babbling anglers, and it quickly became clear that the lower river was awash with fresh fish and had fished its socks off. I wolfed my delicious supper and was quickly throwing my waders on and rushing back to the home pool, desperate for a piece of the action as the light started to dwindle and I felt the first icy chill of the arctic twilight.



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Perhaps twenty steps down the pool, a classic junction where the Ryabaga stream joins the main river, I had a solid pull. After a spirited but unspectacular fight, a coloured ten-pound hen was nursed into the shallows. I gently eased out the barbless fly - one of Duncan Egan's killing Flamethrowers, tied by the man himself - and watched the fish kick strongly back into the folds of the river. Eyeing the last of the light now fading into the west, I took a quick nip of Glenlivet from the flask, and waded in for the first of my customary dozen or so "last casts".

The next moment will live long in the memory: perhaps two seconds after the fly had touched down on the glassy surface, a flying silver rocketship of a fish did its level best to wrench my right arm clean out of its socket. The line fizzed off of my fly reel in a blur and suddenly the fish was seventy yards away and leaping dementedly against the gunmetal canvas of the eastern sky. I was genuinely overwhelmed, and it took an almost embarrassingly long time to bring the salmon, just ten pounds of raw silver energy, to hand.

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Gazing down at this rock-hard bullet of a fish, its ice-blue flanks gleaming in the half-light, I knew that, in that one brief instant, I had fallen hard for the Ponoï and its fabulous autumn fish.

The next day couldn't come soon enough: Mike and I had drawn Lower Tomba, a magnificent beat that had been a regular feature of Bill's not-so-tall tales from his time on Ponoï.

After an unsettlingly slow morning, I waded down the right bank opposite a spectacular bluff that defines the beat. The barometer started to climb and suddenly, for over an hour, found myself hooking the Ponoï's big silver prize-fighters almost at will. Mike was doing even more spectacular damage from the boat. Using a pot-bellied pig I'd pressed into his hand, he could barely get the thing into the water before it was wrenched off downstream by yet another Russian hellraiser.

The days rushed by in a blur: after one particularly hectic session, filling my boots with nine fish - eight of them fresh, chrome-silver and absolutely red-hot - employing our by now established "default" set-up comprising a type 3 sink-tip with a small pot-bellied pig in cascade livery, I decided it was time to rev things up. I took off the sink-tip, fished out a big sunray shadow and, riffling it through the surface with a big downstream mend, had the water foaming and boiling as the osankhas tried to catch up with it. Our guide had to council Mike to pay attention to his own rod as the irresistible bombardment reached fever-pitch and suddenly I was off to the races as an almost obese slab of leaping silver mayhem in the low teens clambered high into the northern sky.

Other anglers were enjoying similar success with unorthodox techniques not normally associated with cold water and fresh fish - Joris de Schepper, a charming Frenchman and a Ponoï regular for many years, resolved to fish only dry flies and, despite the water being only around 11 degrees, was having a ball.

Ponoï is like that: a place that defies all the old conventions, and encourages you to employ all those tactics you've secretly harboured a desire to try back home but haven't, on account of not wanting to send your Scottish Ghillie into apoplectic purple paroxysms. Surface flies, hitched flies, purple flies, earplugs on a hook (!!!)...I kid you not, even in the icy waters of the Russian autumn, these Ponoï fish will attack them all with gusto. Wait until the fish are coming thick and fast and then, if you fancy it, tie it on - whatever it is! Believe me, if the fish are on the take and it doesn't work here, throw it in the river.

At night, the bar was full of stories of increasingly adventurous angling exploits, and absolutely everybody - young and not so young - was having plenty of action and plenty of fun. Predictably, Bill Drury was catching the most fish, his elegant and consistent presentation at almost any range, along with his intimate knowledge of the river undoubtedly the lynchpin of his success. His boat-partner, Andy Britton, a really affable rod from north of the border pulled out all the stops and fished out of his skin to keep up with the maestro, which, commendably, he did. Between them, the boys had nearly ninety fish for the week, with Billy ahead by only a couple of fish. Elsewhere, I have to mention Jane Adley in dispatches, a lovely lady who is at a time in life when many of her peers might balk at tackling such a wild environment and such boisterous fish. Jane was doing her level best to empty the river, ably assisted by her hugely congenial boat partner, Rod Murray, who managed a twenty pound resident in amongst all the silver magic.



I also have to cite a quintessential father and son team: Richard Mildmay-White and his son Nick, who unluckily lost one of the biggest fish that the Ponoï has ever seen, after an epic tussle. Richard is a proud father and a loveable rogue, with more than a sparkle of mischief in his eyes, while Nick is great company and a real gent. I have to commend Nick especially after he helped one stumbling and disorientated angling photographer, whose name I forget, back to his tent. Apparently, the relentless early morning photo-sessions - and who knows, perhaps just a spot too much vodka - had caught up with him...

In truth, it's unfair to single anyone out: everyone fished and behaved magnificently, and the legendary Ryabaga spirit was truly palpable. The policy of having everybody - guides, staff & anglers - all eat, drink & commune in the one large tent goes a long way to creating this special feeling of togetherness. The guides are hand-picked from Russia and around the world and all are superlative: utterly professional and great fun to be with on the river. Take Heather Seitz - a sassy nineteen-year old from Pennsylvania on her very first week's guide training on Ponoï. Heather is a sweetheart: great company, sharp as a tack, and - notwithstanding the chiselled features of one Mr William Drury Esq. - the best looking guide I'm ever likely to fish with. She's also an excellent and intuitive angler, who has fished for the USA youth team and has fishing in her blood.

Mike and I were into our last afternoon, fishing together from the boat and, as my mate Enda would have it, enjoying good 'craic'. After the craziness we'd been experiencing for much of the week, we were experiencing a rare lull. We weren't too fussed - we'd been spoilt rotten and it would have been churlish to sulk after such a week, but I did just want that one last fish before we reeled up and headed for home. All out of ideas, I nudged Heather and asked for some suggestions: she was onto it in a shot. The easy-going banter went out of the window: picking out a smaller, darker fly, she had me cast a little less square, to slow the fly down a little, and suggested that I 'jig' the fly rather than figure-of-eighting it back to the boat as is my normal custom for these aggressive Russian fish. You can guess the rest - two casts later, I was playing my last fish of the week. Heather grinned at me, and I felt that painful stab of ego-crushing humility that the gals like to visit upon us men-folk all too often when we're out fishing for salmon.

The Ponoï offers fishing beyond my wildest dreams. No-one can pretend that the fishing is cheap, but do what you can: beg, borrow or steal the money, because Ryabaga Camp is one of the most special fly-fishing experiences on the planet and you simply have to go there. Work hard, save hard, and who knows, perhaps I'll see you next year on the Stairway to Heaven.

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