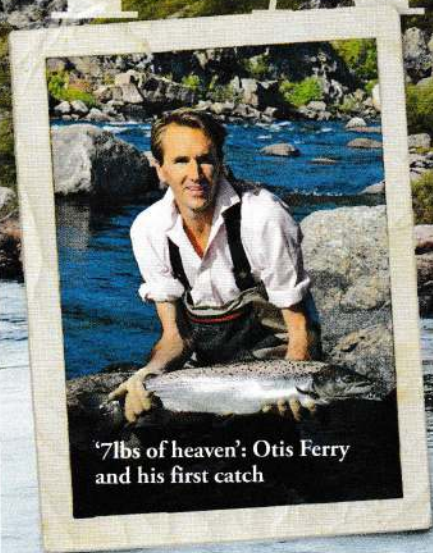


# T A T R A V E L L E R

Edited by FRANCISCA KELLETT




'7lbs of heaven': Otis Ferry and his first catch

## GIVE A MAN A FISH

*Go on, just one – what, not even a nibble? After travelling thousands of miles to fish Russia's Kola Peninsula, Otis Ferry thought luck was against him... and then the tide turned*

Salmon fly-fishing on  
the Kola Peninsula



ABOVE, A HELICOPTER OVER THE KOLA PENINSULA. BELOW, A GANG OF EXCITABLE FISHERMAN INSIDE THE CHOPPER



TOP RIGHT, A WELL-EARNED FEAST: BOWLS OF LOCAL BORSCHT AT LUNCH. LEFT, THE RYNDA RIVER. RIGHT, THE RYNDA LODGE

**F**ishermen are brilliant at excuses. You know the ones. 'Not enough water.' 'Not enough sun.' 'Too much water.' 'Slightly too much sun, and my thumb hurt a bit.' Anything, really, to explain why they've returned home empty-handed and ashamed.

After an entire British season of bad conditions – and excuses – the time had come to explore new options. I phoned my angling go-to man, the aptly named Adrian Dangar, owner of travel company Wild and Exotic. His response was instant: Kola Peninsula. The best salmon fishing in the world. A bit of Google mapping, a few more calls, and within a week I was booked in.

The thing about the Kola Peninsula is that it's not Scotland. Which means you might actually catch a fish. But getting there is a bit more complicated than zipping up the M1 on a rainy Friday. Set 150 miles above the Arctic Circle, the Kola Peninsula is 1.7 million acres of Russian tundra, jutting into the White and Barents seas, and it's veined with icy rivers that host some of the healthiest runs of Atlantic salmon in the world. But getting there, that's the thing. It's a full-on, 24-hour adventure – first with Finnair to Helsinki, then a charter flight to Murmansk. That's where the chopper trip begins.

I broke my journey with a stopover at the Hilton Helsinki Airport, where I ate supper in the bar and wandered over to what I thought was the rest of my fishing group. They turned out to be the Finnish golfing team. It wasn't until the following morning that I met the others on the charter flight – a handful of mostly jovial (male) Brits, with a few Russians thrown in. At bleak, grey Murmansk, we were met by chilly weather and chillier passport controllers – bulky and stern in their felt uniforms and enormous hats – before being transferred across

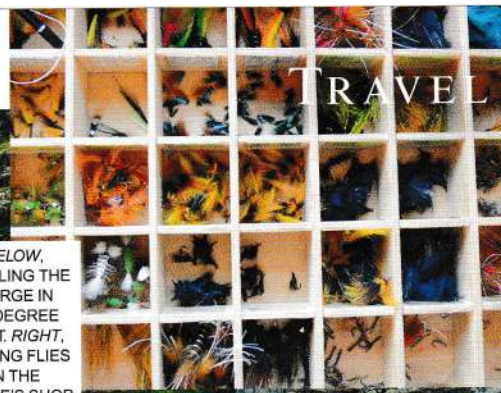
the tussock-strewn runway to our helicopter. And there it was, our army chopper, looking more like a dodo than a bird of the air. Last summer, two Britons were killed in a helicopter crash in the Kola area – the accident was blamed on freak weather conditions – and there were a few nervous faces in our group. However, after much rattling and shaking, we were airborne and off, zooming over mile upon mile of dramatic, uninhabited wilderness. Someone produced a bottle of whisky and we took turns to take swigs, rowdy and excited by the views. The further we went, the rougher the terrain and the more fishable the streams and lochs looked. And then, an hour in, we swung around for our first view of the Rynda river and our camp, hunkered down in the moonlike tundra, surrounded by pools and waterfalls, like some smart, wooden space station.

The doors opened and in rushed a surprising gust of balmy summer air. We jumped out, noisy with schoolboy excitement as a swarm of staff swept up our kit and led us to our cosy and spotlessly clean cabins. But this was not

the time for admiring the decor. It was time to fish. It was only midday, so we loaded up into the camp's 'Eurocopter', a five-seater helicopter that was to be our runaround for the week. Taking that first flight along the length of the river, just a few feet above the valley, I felt a familiar prickle of concern about the conditions. To my horror Zhenya, my quiet, grizzled guide, agreed. Bright sun, not enough water. 'Very bad,' he murmured. I had travelled 5,000 miles to hear the same old excuses. Marvellous.

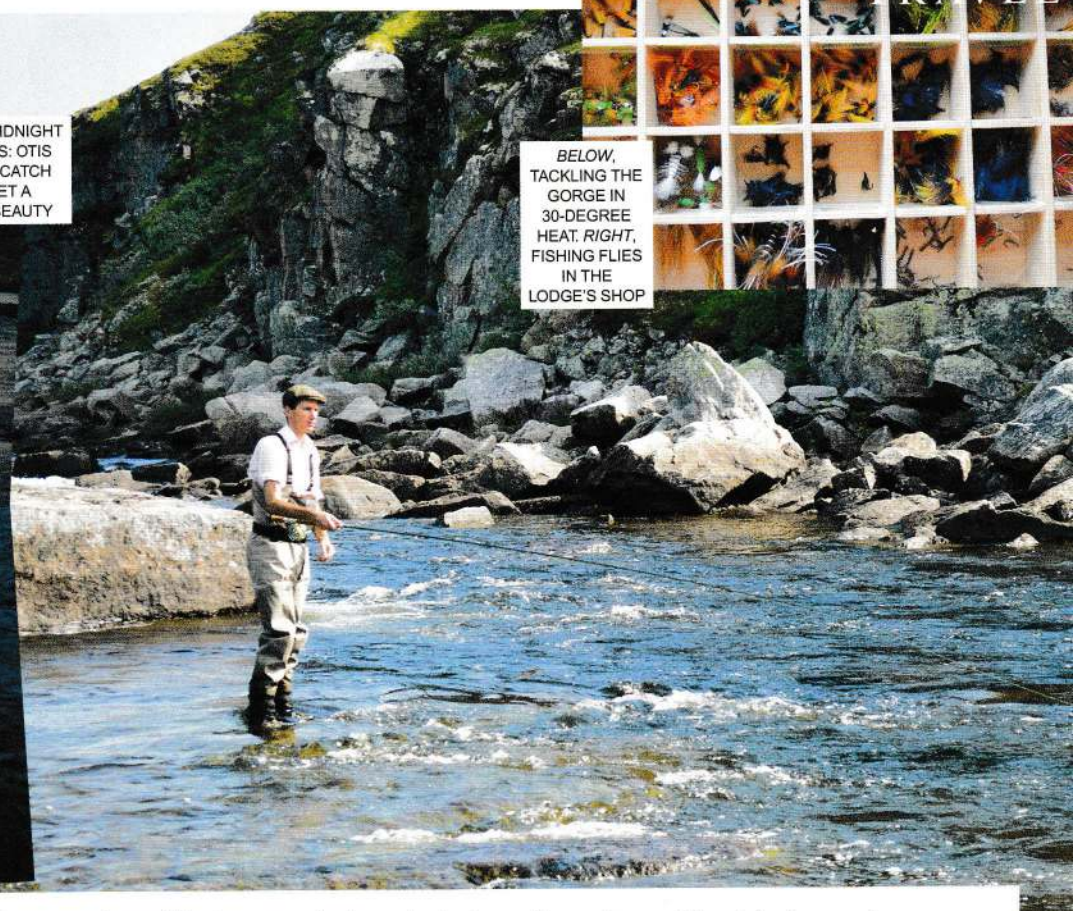
But God, it was beautiful. The sun was high, the sky cloudless and the river stunning – gin-clear despite the peaty soil, with dramatic pools, lochs and ravines carving towards the Barents. I launched into it zealously but, despite doing everything Zhenya advised, my enthusiasm was unrewarded. I was crestfallen; I simply couldn't have come all this way not to land something. Could I?

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SOMETHING



LEFT, MIDNIGHT ANTICS: OTIS & IAN CATCH & NET A 12LB BEAUTY

Caught this for the halibut...



BELOW, TACKLING THE GORGE IN 30-DEGREE HEAT. RIGHT, FISHING FLIES IN THE LODGE'S SHOP

The next day was much as the first: bright, sunny, beautiful – in other words, the worst possible weather for fly fishing. We fished hard all morning without so much as a pull, then lay in the sun and ate bowls of local borscht – beetroot, cabbage, meat and beans. And then that afternoon, as I daydreamed, hypnotised by my line as it swirled and swayed with the frothy current, it happened: my first bite. In an instant, my line tightened and whipped off between my fingers. My heart pounded; the fight was explosive but short. My first Kola salmon was in the net.

Like every fish caught here, it was gently unhooked, quickly photographed and released back into the flow. And so it went on. The beat rotation meant we could fish the entire length of the river, never trying the same pool twice. Zhenya was patient, offering advice when asked and otherwise letting me thrash away, learning from pool to pool. I was fairly set in my ways, but having a personal guide gave me confidence to explore new techniques. The greatest thrill was hitching dry flies across the surface, watching the V wake across the current as salmon bobbed to the surface to grab it.

At nightfall – although we only knew it by our watches as the sun barely dipped below the horizon, casting everything in a pearly twilight – the 12 guests would all meet at the main lodge, for vast quantities of sushi, steak, reindeer and king crab. (In the early days on the Rynda, the venison would be kept in the river to preserve it and the chef would periodically remove it from its hessian sack to beat it with a rock in an attempt to tenderise the meat.)

Supper was a noisy affair, helped along by the whisky-swilling English gang. Some of them hadn't told their wives where they were going; they'd said they were in Scotland with no phone signal (and I am on oath not to mention their names). The other large party was the delightful but bloodthirsty Russian family behind Russia's biggest hunting-safari company. Although their English was only marginally better than my Russian, I was able to deduce that they had hunted or fished for just about every creature on the planet. Even Mickael, the 13-year-old son,

had caught sharks and hunted crocodiles with a bow and arrow. The drinks cabinet was well used (especially by the Brits), but every night I would slip away into the half-light to fish the home pool. It was mesmerising: just the swirl of water, the whisper of the birches and wild blueberry bushes, and the water around me teeming with salmon. Each night I was rewarded with a catch.

On the last evening, after the usual feasting, drinking and shouting of jokes, I once again went to the home pool for my last chance of a midnight cast. After about an hour, I was snapped out of my fisherman's trance by crunching gravel. Mick, one of the group, was stumbling down to the riverbank, glass in hand.

Just as he settled on a rock beside me, slurring that I was mad to fish in this twilight, there was an almighty swirl and a mad spinning of my reel as an enormous lump of silver tore off downstream. Within a second the fish was leaping and thrashing a hundred yards away.

Mick almost dropped his drink, roaring with excitement, before hobbling off to get help: this fish was much bigger than anything I'd caught all week. I perched on a boulder trying to subdue my angry quarry as the entire drunken rabble thundered down to the bank, drinks sloshing in their glasses. They wobbled about shouting advice, before Ian, one of the onlookers, rolled up his trousers and launched into the shallows with a net. To a roar of celebration, he netted it – a pristine specimen, at least 12lb and fresh from the sea. I was ecstatic.

That last beauty brought my total up to 15 – a very respectable number – far more than I'd caught over years of fishing back home. And that was probably only about half the average for a fishing trip to Kola. But then that was because of the sun. Did I mention that? And the low water? Dreadful conditions, you know. □

**BOOK IT** Wild and Exotic Ltd ([wildandexotic.co.uk](http://wildandexotic.co.uk); 01439 748401) arranges fishing trips to the Kola Peninsula, from £2,500-£9,000 a person, including guided fishing, transfers and full-board accommodation from June to early September. Finnair flies from London to Helsinki up to five times daily, from £135.

