

Land of the giants

TONY KING reckoned the Begna watershed to the north-east of Bergen should hold decent trout. He was right!

After many visits to Norway in pursuit of salmon, some of the brown trout by-catch I'd made had already convinced me that I should take along a trout rod on my next adventure. However, as it turned out, my next trip was to be to a Norwegian system which was connected to a vast lake rather than the sea, so there were obviously no migratory fish to be found there at all.

I didn't need much persuading; I had heard that before the winter set in, the locals would net the region's lakes and rivers for food. In the process some huge fish would turn up. In addition, the numbers and weights of the declared net catch stacked the evidence of a highly productive system.

I had landed a dream job: the idea was to fish the area with the support and guidance of local fly fishers to assess the potential as a trout fishing destination.

The Valdres region of Norway is situated north west of Oslo and north east of Bergen.

I landed at Oslo and then headed for Fagernes, the region's main town which is served by an airport with regular connections to Oslo. After driving for hours, it seems I could have taken another plane, slept on it,

and ended up much closer to my destination.

Valdres is a vast mountainous area with small settlements in the partly agricultural river valleys. Farming is on a very small scale, no vast herds grazing the banks of the many small spawning streams that descend to meet the river that in turn flows along the deep glacial valley. A system, in short, with everything a trout needs.

The rivers rise on the hills and are devoid of any pollution; urban, industrial or agricultural and as a consequence the fly life is staggeringly diverse with complex hatches of Mayflies, sedges, and stoneflies occurring at a time of the year when hatches elsewhere can become meagre. A combination of latitude and elevation make Valdres a fantastic mid to late summer destination with big, beautiful free-rising trout, huge hatches of fly, stunning scenery and excellent local accommodation and guides.

The Begna is the main river rising in the southern part of the Jothheimen region (realm of the giants). Begna flows south through Valdres to Honefoss where it enters Tyriforden. The Begna is 213km in length and drains a watershed of 4875 sq km and is the primary river in this watershed.

The initial area of my focus on the Begna was Ryfoss. Here the river is a manageable size – pretty big by UK standards – but wadeable and not

impossible to fathom. In the Ryfoss area the speed of the river is pretty much dictated by its width; wide and medium paced or narrower and fast. We fished in July, but big winter snowfall residues and warm drizzly weather combined to produce high water levels, and flooded margins. The water remained crystal clear and the hatches of fly in the muggy weather were splendid. Sunny periods during the day produced good hatches of medium to large olives with stoneflies putting in a regular appearance and sedges becoming the predominant species in the evenings. These hatches of fly were a delight in their complexity, but posed many questions and no single selection of fly producing a final answer.

Puzzle

Deciding which fly was on the menu for individual trout, coupled with the problems of producing a reasonable drift was a mental puzzle like a crossword or a game of chess, or "a battle of wits with a moron", as it was once described by an old (non-fishing) friend.

The majority of the flies looked like the rough olive you see on many northern rivers and a green Klinkhåmer initially did the trick. The river was wide with a complex flow over and around big boulders so, to get any chance of a drag-free drift involved a certain amount of accurate casting over distance to get a fly over fish that were coming up from deep pockets in the rocky bottom. Six feet of drift without drag was a big ask in those conditions, but it happened often enough to keep us at it.

The rise pattern of these fish was another part to the complex equation; imagine contriving a cast to ensure there was no drag at 60 feet and then, when everything had just come together nicely and your fly was approaching the critical zone, seeing the trout rise to a natural and head down to its lair as your fly drifts serenely and unnoticed over its head. The rewards, however, outweighed the frustration. The majority of fish seemed to be between one and two pounds (400 grams to one kilo), all as wild as the surrounding mountains, and beautifully finned and spotted.

Local guides Kristoffer Kvien and Rune Kverna took us to the best places and allowed us the privilege of fishing like a local, the river was big and it was their knowledge of the system that put us into fishable parts

A nice Norwegian trout during the evening sedge hatch.



‘We left reluctantly after three days of exceptional fishing’



Valdres: everything a trout and trout fisherman needs.

of this extensive fishery. They also provided a regular supply of strong black coffee with the occasional addition of a little eau de vie. They provided excellent company and were a constant source of local knowledge showing us a number of places we would have missed if going it alone.

Fishing down-and-across with spiders was equally successful between periods of rising fish, as was nymphing with heavy beaded nymphs and Woolly Buggers cast above square and bumped along the bottom, the predominant local method which produced the goods particularly in the evenings. Upstream nymphing with an indicator or, better still, using a big Klinkhåmer as an indicator with a weighted nymph on a New Zealand dropper provided successful answers to the many technical problems with which we were constantly faced.

Drifting nymphs down the bubble-lines amongst the rocks was a lot of fun, and the addition of shot or soft-weight putty above the nymph to match the depth and flow was as engaging as it gets. All of this to cover the gaps between hatches and free-rising fish, and a couple of fish approaching (3.5-4.5lb) 1.5 to 2kg – not too shabby by any standards.

Our accommodation was as good as

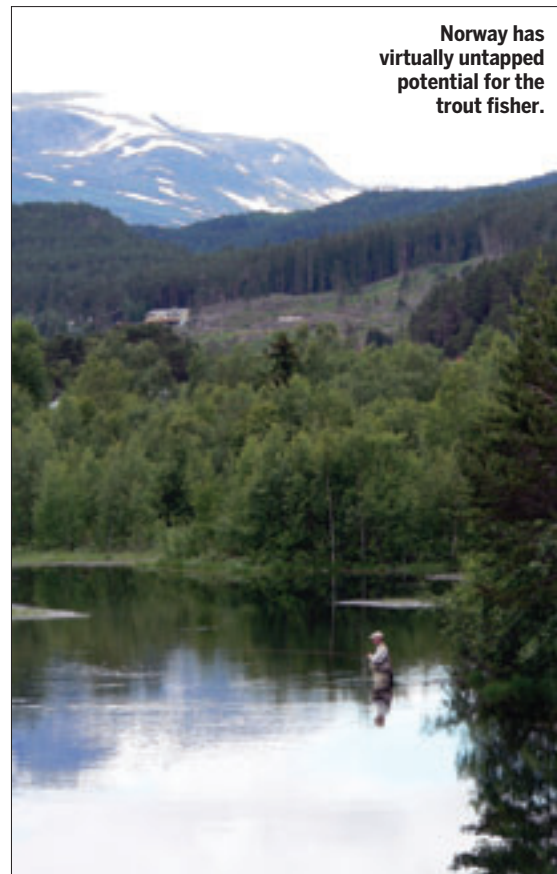
the fishing, Sørre Hemsing provides Norwegian style farmhouse B&B in a 16th Century timber-built farmhouse in the shadow of the mountains over a lake in the Begna chain. Goats and lambs wandered freely around the farm and the tinkling of cattle bells made for an idyllic setting for swigging beer and swapping stories after a satisfying evening meal of soup, local sausage, deer, moose and other cured meats and cheeses followed by cloudberry cream.

Local dish

Some of the local dishes are a little weird to the average taste. “Rot fish” is exactly what its name suggests, it smells like a badly run trout farm, but if you can steal yourself, it tastes pretty good with bread or flat bread and pickles.

We left Ryfoss reluctantly after three days of exceptional fishing in far less than perfect conditions with the river being five feet (1.5 metres) above normal levels.

Rene and Kristoffer took us down the valley to introduce us to our guides for the next destination Morten and Ove. They then took us over the mountains to Vinstern – Bjødnehølen at Haugseter 1,030 metres above sea level, where we fished another system of lakes and



Norway has virtually untapped potential for the trout fisher.

joining sections of river. Here the fish were smaller, but still averaged about a pound in weight and catching them in rocky upland lakes and rivers to the sound of cackling grouse was a knock-out. The beauty of this desolate upland wilderness was breathtaking. The fish cruise the shallow, clear water lakes rising lazily to stoneflies, mosquitoes and caddis or wait for food to drift to them in the connecting sections of river.

The first day saw us take a few nice fish from a midday buzzer hatch but an approaching storm cut short our stay and prevented us from exploring the area as we had hoped. After a night in the Haugseter hunting lodge we headed back to Fagernes and on to another dramatic piece of fishing at Tisleia – Fløten, where Morten and Ove took us to meet Rolf our host and guide at Vasetdansen camp.

Luxury cabin

We stayed in a luxurious log cabin at the side of the Tisleia River, a major tributary of the Begna. Our guides then took us up to another high plateau where the river left another vast lake and crossed some pristine upland moor with ling and birch scrub. The river ran fast and was again running higher than ideal, at over 800 metres above sea level the landscape was dramatic, and the fishing superb.

Because of the elevation, the hatches were briefer in duration than those we experienced in Ryfoss, but the diversity of species was, if anything, greater and included some upwings of Mayfly size, a food source complemented with terrestrial flies and beetles from the heather. Again, most of the fish caught were around the pound mark, but we saw several much larger fish including one fish that rose to a my dry and shocked me with its size to the extent that I stood in the water and goggled failing to connect. Harald was bemused and appalled at my incompetence but equally gobsmacked, convinced that there where no salmon in the system.

Opportunities to fish the dry fly



were frequent, but quiet periods were spent fishing the rocky runs Czech nymph style, or with an indicator and nymph set up. Here again we met unusually high water conditions and relied on Morten, Ove and Rolf to direct us to areas with fish-holding features that we would probably have missed without their good natured guidance. A spirit stove and espresso jug provided thick black coffee to lace with local spirit and to wash down the slices of moose sausage and flat bread that appeared as punctuation to some challenging technical fishing for big, hard-fighting wild brown trout.

A #4/5 weight set-up proved a perfect combination for most of the fishing, but a 6-weight was handy for the breezier conditions we encountered in the open moorland areas. Successful flies were; Klinkhåmers in olive, amber, black and rust. Adams and Humpys also took fish as did Elk Hair Sedges. Various bead-headed nymphs, and Polish nymphs did the business sub-surface. After fishing on the first night at Vasetdansen, Rolf took us on an elk spotting safari and showed us some of the incredible diversity of fauna and flora of the region. Rolf produces his own Tisleia moose

sausage from beasts he shoots in the area: a true mountain man as well as an accomplished fisherman, and like all our guides, a day in his company is a day well spent.

Fishing in Valdres was a satisfying experience. The wildness of the place, the clear mountain air and the style and simplicity of the accommodation proved most enjoyable. The fishing was challenging enough to hold one's attention as well as being consistent enough to allow for experimentation. There are some brutes of trout there waiting to be caught, the largest reported during our stay being a shade over 10 pounds (5 kg). It would be fun to try some streamer patterns to target the 'big boys' on heavier tackle. Finally, our guides provided good company in this unspoilt wilderness, plus all important local knowledge and the transport to some pretty special places.

On the drive from Valdres we headed for Flamm to fish once more for big fish; this time in a seven-kilometre river that produced many salmon over 22lb. But as I set up my salmon rod, I wondered if I would miss the complexity of Norwegian trout more than I would welcome the rest of the relative simplicity of a week's salmon fishing.

Setting up camp.

Log cabin accommodation right by the river.



Information

- To get to Oslo, the author took an inexpensive Norwegian Air flight from Stanstead to Oslo. To contact the local tourism office, contact: hanne.lykkja@vestre-slidre.kommune.no
- The Valdres regional 'Fiskcard' covers all the areas described and more than we had no time to visit.

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