

HOOKED ON ASTURIAS



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So big were the trout given to Charles I of England from Segovia hill streams in 1647 that in a letter home he was inspired to write "a certaine troute of extraordinary greatness."

Little wonder that 360 years on, angling writer Phil Pembroke needed no further excuse to take the bait and head for sunny Spain.



on Asturias

Combine a passion for fishing with a love of travel and the result is almost inevitable – pack your tackle and bags, pick up the hire car, drive to Plymouth and board the ferry for Santander. So began my very own personal pilgrimage, driving around northern Spain for two blissful weeks in search of a fish of a lifetime.

And what a beginning. As the ferry sails into Santander, the towering snow-capped peaks of the Picos de Europa are a spectacular gateway and welcome to a landscape of stunning beauty. The

omens for fishing could hardly be better either. The harbour is alive with mullet and there are some huge fish to be seen.

My first destination was the principality of Asturias, less than an hour's drive west from Santander along the coastal A-8 autopista. The exhilarating cocktail of majestic mountains, abundant freshwater and proximity to the sea is the perfect recipe for clear fast-flowing rivers alive with very inviting trout and salmon.

More salmon are caught here annually than in the rest of Iberia put



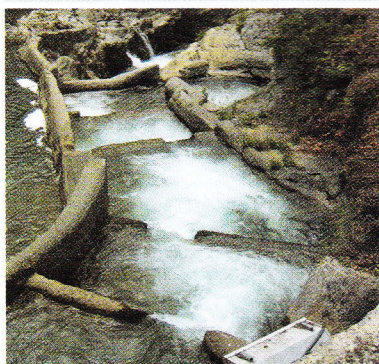
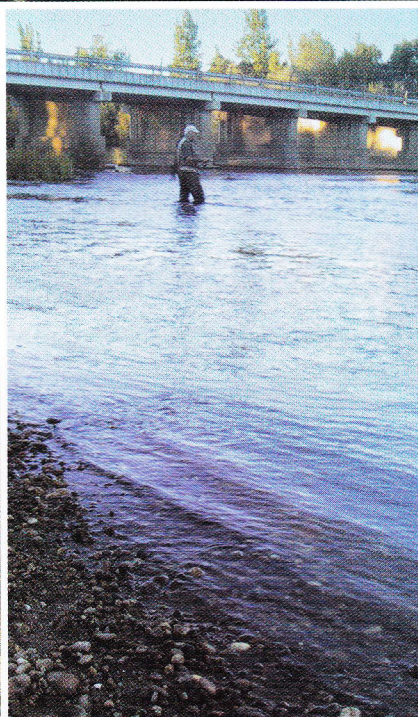
Previous page: Río Sella – alive with inviting trout and salmon.

Above: A selection of flies: Woolly Bugger, Coq de Leon and Klinkhammer.

Right: An enormous amount of skill and patience is required to manoeuvre the bait through the often deep water.

Below: A fish ladder on the Río Sella near Cangas de Onís.

Bottom: One of the pozo – deep and clear salmon pools in Asturias.



together. I had heard that a 14.5 kg fish – the biggest salmon for 40 years – was landed here in 2003. I could hardly wait to try my luck. And I certainly had the perfect holiday base – the well-appointed Parador de Cangas de Onís, a converted 12th-century monastery hotel situated right on the banks of the superb Río Sella.

Much of my fishing took place on free water. The regional angling licence you require costs only about 12 euros. The technique used by many local anglers is to focus on deeper pools and holding water, so you could well find that the better fly water is relatively uncrowded. In fact, fly fishermen are in paradise here, with fantastic stretches of salmon water.

Local tactics for catching salmon involve spotting them in the crystal clear water and gently dropping the fly or bait just in front and waiting until a fish becomes irritated to the point where it takes. It requires an enormous amount of skill and patience to manoeuvre the bait through the often very deep water.

“ I had heard that the biggest salmon for 40 years was landed here ”

Brown and sea trout were free rising and readily took my dry fly (sea trout behave just like brown), and the most rewarding times were early morning and late evenings to coincide with the best insect hatches.

I fished two free water beats. The first, near the junction of a major tributary, is varied and more open, and the second begins in the village of Las Rosas, running down a few kilometres to the outskirts of Arriondas. This last beat is quite overgrown and lightly fished, with a good mix of water. It is also shallower and easy to wade.

Fly-fishing for trout here requires very light tackle, fine leaders and small flies. The fish are very quick so short lines are a must to catch their lightning takes.

Initially my line dragged, resulting in missed fish and frustration. But I soon got the hang of it.

My fishing guide, a master of this technique, worked his way upstream

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like a heron, constantly casting and recasting a very short line. "Yo soy una máquina (I am a machine)," he told me, and he certainly is! His fishing club were perfect hosts and have a website well worth dipping into:

www.mestasdelnarcea.com

The fishing season in Asturias begins with the Campanu Festival. The word means bell ringing and this is how a town used to celebrate the first salmon catch – a sound the rest of the valley could hardly ignore. Today, when a lucky angler catches the first salmon it is bestowed the



Río Orbigo, Zamora.

title La Campanu and honoured with a wonderful trophy before being ceremoniously auctioned off – for no less than 5,200 euros in 2006.

It's a major event, broadcast live on national TV and radio and the following day the newspapers carry front-page news stories on the prospects for the new season.

Since 1999, 12th-century Monasterio de San Salvador de Cornellana in Salas has also celebrated the opening of the season in March – by hosting a game fair. Two years ago the guest of honour was David 'Beck-ham'.

In complete contrast to the steep narrow valleys of Asturias, the rivers near León – 200 km easy driving south – meander more leisurely along open pasture through wide flood plains. Benavente makes an excellent base and I stayed at the Parador Benavente at the western end of town, only 10 minutes from the Río Orbigo at Santa Cristina de la Polvorosa.

Here I cast upstream from the road

bridge, where fishing is free. I caught brown trout averaging 1 kg on a dry fly, but the enormous pike – up to 10 kg – lay in ambush.

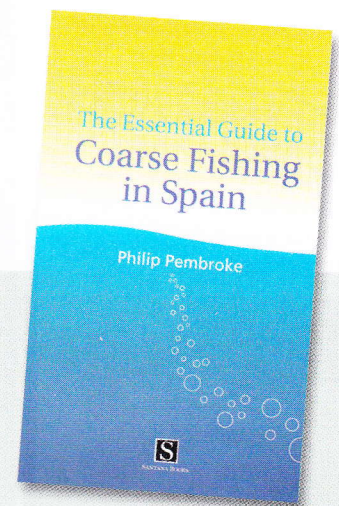
A further 10 minutes' drive south took me to the Coto de Mózar, situated by a bridge over the lovely Río Tera. I bought my day ticket, valid from 15th April to 31st October, at the campsite bar across the road.

Aggressive rainbow trout averaging 25 cm were the order of the day. Well, they certainly were for a small boy fishing by the road bridge nearby.

Whereas I opted for a golden-headed hare's ear nymph fly and hook size 14, he was trotting sweetcorn using a float and caught 5 trout in just an hour – better than I did! So much for expert over local knowledge!

I learned something else too – that the Gallo de León is a local species of cockerel found nowhere else and is bred specifically to provide feathers for making trout flies. Although I didn't see the feathers, I can confirm that the bird tastes delicious.

Fishing in northern Spain gave me a very rewarding holiday and a fantastic time. And if you cash in on special offers you can land a double room at a parador for as little as £33 a night plus IVA. Great value in my book – particularly as the quality of game angling in this most glorious part of Spain must surely rate as one of the best-kept secrets in the fishing world. ■



Phil Pembroke is also the author of
Coarse Fishing in Spain
(ISBN 0954692438).

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