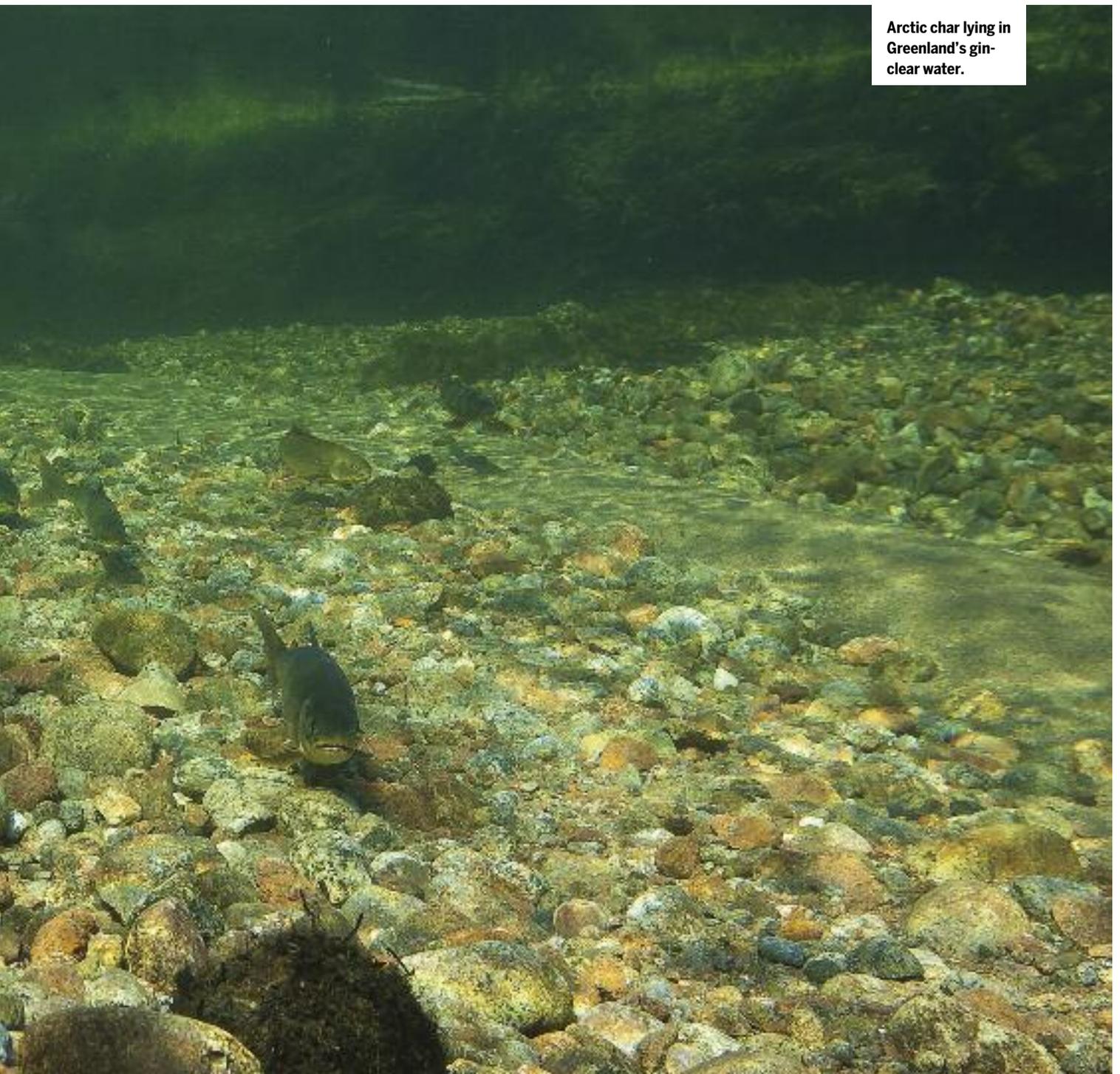




A fish on every cast

PHIL COBHAM was captivated by stunning images of Arctic char and became hooked on the idea of travelling to distant Greenland to catch one ... or more

Arctic char lying in Greenland's gin-clear water.



“A fish on every cast, so many you’ll have had enough enjoyment after only a couple of days!” That’s what they told me about char fishing in Greenland. I’d also heard that the accommodation is somewhat basic, i.e. in tents, and that the mosquitoes are a menace. Why then had I been pondering a trip to Greenland for several years?

It started in 2006. I was travelling to Scandinavia regularly for business, and like most keen anglers, I always took a moment to browse the fishing titles in newsagents or airport kiosks. Whilst thumbing through the pages of the Swedish publication, *Flugfiske-Feber* (‘Flyfishing fever’), I saw some stunning images of Arctic char which captured my



Stunning char capture the imagination.

imagination. Basically, here was a type of Nordic ‘trout’ with a technicolour overcoat. In Britain, I often hear it commented that wild brown trout are of the gods, but take a look at a spawning, coloured char. It has an emerald green back, the flanks are covered with large, cream-coloured spots (the green gradually gives way to an orange red or sometimes yellow belly), and the dark fins are edged with brilliant white tips. Could Michelangelo have done better? Moreover, although it was an unfamiliar fish to me, I did know that it fought hard and ate very well. I was hooked. It was just a matter of where and when.

My first attempts at catching char were woeful. I failed in Finland and then skunked in Sweden. This is not an easy fish to catch, especially in its resident form. Iceland has ➔

◀ been kinder for both anadromous (sea migratory) and resident char, and I had managed to catch both to 2lb and 3½lb respectively. The fish in Greenland are all sea-run. They abound, are bigger and take flies with wanton abandon, Icelanders told me.

Subsequently, I set about researching fishing opportunities on Erik the Red's oddly named green frozen island. There are a good number of Scandinavian outfitters offering week-long stays in camps dotted amongst the Greenlandic wilderness ... seven nights of sleeping bags, snoring, rain and the possibility of persistent biting insects ... and then I came upon the Ipiutaq Guest Farm. Located close to Narsarsuaq airport with regular connections to Copenhagen and Reykjavik, its website describes a valley not far from the guesthouse where the River Ilua empties into a lake, set in a valley and enclosed between towering peaks. Further searches turned up several Danish videos of anglers catching fish on the crystalline Ilua, and there are some sequences showing pools filled to bursting with sea-run char waiting to answer nature's call. Fish in a barrel, too easy?

The lake has an outflow to the sea fjord, and the river is mostly underground feed with some snow-melt. It becomes fishable from a series of ladder step waterfalls several miles upstream of the lake. The Ipiutaq guest farm is the family home of French architect Agathe, her Greenlandic husband, Kalista and their daughter Ina. It is a working farm with a good head of sheep but Agathe and Kalista are in process of completing a separate self-catering guest house to sleep six just a stone's throw from the family home. This accommodation will be ready this summer.

The seasons are short – beginning in late June the weather can turn cold and inhospitable at any time from late August, which means a two-month window for tourism and fishing.

Arriving at Narsarsuaq's diminutive airport, Agathe had organised a boat transfer to the farm. There was only the lightest of breezes which enabled the zodiac to speed down the fjord, skirting icebergs and delivering me and my bags safely to the Ipiutaq jetty 40 minutes later. The farm enjoys a spectacular setting. Surrounding the farm buildings are lush fields which rise steadily from the waterside to become the high hill slopes that must be crossed to reach the Ilhua valley.

The hike is strenuous. There is a path of sorts for the first stretch which winds uphill and takes you over the mountain. Once over the hill the valley lies out before you and the lake and river are visible a mile or so beyond. The walk down to the river is made awkward in parts because the valley floor and riverside slopes are covered with dense Arctic dwarf birch which takes some walking through. I arrived an hour later, sweat-soaked, breathless and brimming with anticipation. The nature is awesome and the silence deafening. The effort required to reach the river's edge and its

'FISH IN GREENLAND ABOUND, ARE BIGGER AND TAKE FLIES WITH WANTON ABANDON'

remoteness make this primeval and life affirming, with just a hint of danger resulting from the utter isolation and unfamiliarity. What a superlative contrast for a life more routinely revolving around office meetings, business budgeting and rush-hour traffic!

The river seemed low. My first reconnoitre began about half way between the distant lake and the upper falls, the rumble of which was faintly discernible above the gurgling water of the river at my feet. I could only find one pool deep enough to hold anything sizeable, and my weighted pink lure fished on a floating line took a char of 1lb on the first cast! I released the fish quickly in anticipation of the coming bounty.

"Bring back a couple of fish please," Agathe had requested. "The ones of about a kilo are best."

I moved upstream. Thickening dwarf birch made my progress slower still, but I



Living in a tent is not necessary.

could only find skinny water and so I turned and headed down stream in the hope of finding deeper pools. When I eventually came upon better looking water neither my dead-drifted nymphs or fast stripped lures connected with anything better than six-inch fish!

Too easy, indeed. Five hours later I returned to the farm without supper.

Kalista advised me to try further upstream where there were better pools. As I approached the tail-out my polaroids helped me see a dark mass of fish covering half the pool. Flickering and swaying shimmers of white were visible deep beneath the still surface, these the white-edged fins of hundreds of *Salvelinus alpinus*. I had found my char dorado!

The large sedge indicator supporting a size 14 Hares Ear Nymph several feet below bobbed gracefully along the outer current and then came to an abrupt halt. I lifted quickly and felt the weight of a decent fish buck against my rod, and then a 3lb char shot up to the neck of the pool, jumped twice and then tore down to the tail-out with me in hot pur-

suit. Agathe would hopefully be getting her char tonight! Several minutes later the char was in the net and then on the bank. My hands shook as I studied the prize and taking that slightly guilty pleasure to be had in the handling of one's catch. I decided to fillet the fish as it was a long trek back. Pausing to catch my breath I savoured the moment, congratulating myself for making the effort and taking the time to come such a long way to such a place and all the while knowing how fortunate I am to be able to do so.

The next cast replayed the drama, and so did the next, and the next. I switched from dead-drifting nymphs to stripping a pink and blue Icelandic char fly called Bleik og Bla, the result being the same. Fish on! I took 12 fish between 2-4.5lb on nymphs, lures and finally a size 16 CdC Emerger.

A couple of hours shot by and with a brace in the bag for the farm, I decided to leave these fish be and moved upstream to try another likely looking pool. Here too, there were char to be seen, but fewer fish in a larger pool meant that they were not as willing and I fished hard for a couple of fish. Nevertheless, after the morning's bonanza the trip was a great success and anything else a bonus.

The fish which travel up the lake and into the river are mostly from 1-6lb. The river level has indeed been somewhat low in the last couple of years following dry springs, but short of a drought it is still possible to catch good fish in the upper reaches of the Ilua and in the lower stretches down toward the lake.

The river runs crystal clear over a stony and rocky bottom and is a mixture of fast shallow riffles and slow deeper pools at bends or where the flow is compressed and channelled through narrow rock crevasses.

I spent the afternoon fishing my way downstream, this time finding several pools where I could upstream nymph to specific fish, catching a number in the 2lb range.

On my last morning I also fished the lake at the river mouth and caught innumerable smaller fish of 1-2lb. Apparently, it is also possible to catch char and codling from the farm's boat jetty on the fjord, but you need a fast-sinking line to get down deep.

Catching 4lb sea char on #6 rods is great sport, and these are strong and active fighters so, in typical fashion, I began wondering what really big char would feel like on the end of a #7 rod! Back at the farm, flicking through a French fishing magazine I saw a picture of two anglers holding up big char of around 12lb. In the background a large glacial, chalk-coloured river which I then discovered is only 20 miles away. In Greenland, as one might imagine, roads and infrastructure are in short supply. Travelling from A to B usually means boats, helicopters or epic journeys afoot over rough and frequently mountainous terrain. A degree of forward planning is therefore required. Alas, the chalky river and its monster char had to be added to my 'to do' list as the only boat



for me was heading back to Narsarsuaq airport. There I spoke to Jacky Simoud of Blue Ice Explorer. Jacky knows this glacial river, and on his computer he showed me a few more stirring images of very large char taken in 2010. Somewhat disappointingly, he added that locals had begun to net the mouth of the river, and as a result the few anglers who had ventured forth had not been well rewarded. Everybody has a right to a living and their need and claim is surely greater than mine, but I hope a few of those big char still make it through, whether I am fishing for them or not.

Fishing in such remote and spectacular surroundings really is a treat. I imagine that the white island, rather than the curiously named green one, boasts dozens, or even hun-

dreds of rivers, many of which may never have seen an angler, many with prodigious runs of char during the long days of the short Arctic summer. This is still frontier fishing, and that is its appeal.

The rivers are not privately owned, and there are no landlords or riparian owners. All one needs is a permit from the post office in Narsarsuaq.

Phil Cobham has fished since he was eight-years-old but turned to the fly rod in the 1990s. Now a passionate devotee, his main interest is in wild salmonids and he travels regularly to Iceland, the Pacific north-west, and Slovenia, although he can sometimes be found on the Derbyshire limestone rivers and the rivers and loughs of the west of Ireland.

Ice is never very far away in Greenland.



Information

- Greenland is an autonomous dependency within the kingdom of Denmark. The Danish crown granted Greenland home rule in 1979, and several years later Greenland decided to leave the EEC, but it does retain a privileged status for commerce.
- The currency is the Danish Krone and no visas are required for Europeans travelling to Greenland. The population is only 56,000. The capital, Nuuk, is three hours behind GMT (UK) time, as is Narsarsuaq.
- Flights are limited and quite expensive. There are two main routes to Narsarsuaq and Nuuk, the first being on Air Greenland (www.airgreenland.com) from Copen-



hagen, and the second being from Iceland on Air Iceland (www.airiceland.is). The latter has a good choice of flights from Reykjavik.

- Agathe Devisme of the Ipiutaq guest-farm (www.ipiutaq.gl) was my host, and arranged the boat transfers from Narsarsuaq. Agathe can be reached on guestfarm@ipiutaq.gl
- Jacky Simoud of adventure tourism company Blue Ice Explorer (www.blueice.gl) can be reached at info@blueice.gl. Jacky also provides information on fishing and fishing tours. A useful website for general information is the official tourist site www.greenland.com