

France's secret corner

MARK BOWLER gets a ticket to the extensive, affordable trout and salmon fishing in a little known part of the south-west

Lost in France. Mark Bowler fishes the mountain torrent in the valley of the Aspe.

Herve Baltar has got life sussed. Having left the bustle of Paris and Bordeaux far behind in his 'other life', he lives in a converted mill by a chuckling stream deep in the countryside of south-western France. The only buzz you'll hear at Herve's house is the bees that hunt busily over the wild flower meadows. Occasionally, his beaten-up Range Rover, which he uses as his guiding vehicle, drowns the peaceful silence as it rumbles down the dusty lane making its way to the various trout and salmon rivers and streams that flow through the area.

Hang on a minute! Trout and salmon rivers in southern France?

And some. The Gave d'Oloron, which flows close to Herve's home has a run of between 8-10,000 salmon every year. The secret salmon rivers of this supposedly arid corner of the south-west are due to a couple of geological happenstances: the Pyrenees which rise up to 3,000 metres and form a natural barrier between France and Spain; and the Atlantic Ocean which charges in from the West, producing a surfer's paradise (plus some rather good bass fishing, but that's another story).

The river, fed by cool snow-melt and tumbling streams from the upper Pyrenean slopes to the south, turns west as it increase in size and eases up in pace to produce a roily, powerful flow that joins the Gave de Pau and thence pushes westwards, into the Atlantic at Bayonne. The main run of fish enter the river in May and June and they head for the Oloron and its tributaries higher up, the Aspe and Ossau. Sea trout also enter the river and migrate up the river. So here we find a little piece of Scotland, running close to the Spanish border.

As we gaze over Massey's, the Gave d'Oloron's most famous salmon pool, Herve shows me how productive the river here is. We don't have to turn over many stones before we uncover shrimp, heptagenids, Trichoptera and Ephemeroptera. The rich river also holds barbel and chub and supports a run of shad every year. As we investigate the fish pass at the weir at Massey's, scores of lampreys up to two feet long leap and writhe their way upstream.

Herve tells me that the river here produces a rod-catch of about 200 salmon annually, and in a good year this may rise to 500. A ticket to fish the river here costs €95 for the six-month season. As you might imagine, when the salmon are running, the locals come out in force, but this still doesn't prevent visitors from staying locally and fishing on the various stretches available when it suits.

However, we're not here to fish for salmon. "Today," Herve announces, "we go to fish for trout in the jungle".

Half an hour later we are in the river, creeping along its edge in shirt sleeves and breathables, right under the bank, pushing upstream slowly and carefully, pace by considered pace. This is Indian-style fly fishing. Each step is made as if walking through a minefield, each footfall received with a breathless pause – like a brave stalking a deer – to scrutinise all the edges, hollows and margins for the merest hint of a trout's fin.

The oppressive heat of the maize field in which we parked the Range Rover could be a thousand miles away. Here, underneath the shade of the trees, in our dark, cool sanctuary we are forced to crane our necks

under the overhanging fronds of the trees which line the river's steep banks, and weave our way around the fallen branches, grabbing the stronger limbs for support as we push our way through the knee-deep flow. The Gave d'Oloron, like any good French trout river, is fished hard, and without mercy. 'La truite' is a French delicacy, and public fishing access to the river is good, and cheap, too. It is fished hard by a variety of methods, including spinners, worms and the famed French 'toc' bait-fishing method. The dry and wet fly fishers around here are some of the very best and most persistent in the world, so you see, in order to survive and thrive in the rivers of this area the trout have to be pretty canny. In order to escape anglers' attentions the best trout on the Gave d'Oloron stick to the most overgrown and inaccessible areas, well away from anglers and far out of reach of their baits. The only way to reach these fish is to slip down the tree-lined bank, negotiate all nature's obstacles, and get in with them. Welcome to Herve's jungle.

Few anglers know about these stretches of water, but the trout do. And so does Herve. Here they rest, in the clear water, spotted backs blending in against the mottled stones. Some of them rest in the shallows, others take up station just off the current behind a branch, root or rock, waiting to sip down any trapped duns or spinners that flow their way. In this highly unusual approach, the angler wades up the margins of a river 70 yards wide, solely focussing on the narrow band of water on the inside of his wading path.

"Some days, you might see three or four fish", Herve whispers, "on others, you might draw a blank". Then he freezes. He has spotted a fish lying in a hollow, just seven yards ahead of us. It feels like an age before my eyes can locate it, too – a fish of maybe a pound. My next problem is to deliver the fly. My rod is nine feet long. I need to make a cast of just over four yards with a dry fly on a leader twelve feet long. To add to the challenge, the cluster of leaves from the overhanging branch above my head make an overhead cast impossible. The fly needs to land directly ahead of the fish without spooking it. After a few abortive side-casts, the fly – a CdC Olive – lands in line and drifts dragless over its head. Not a flinch.

The same result occurs with a bigger Sedge. "Try a Nymph," suggests Herve. I pick out a Pheasant Tail Nymph with a tiny goldhead, but Herve shakes his head – apparently any flash in the fly will cause these wary fish to bolt automatically. Feverishly, I seek out and tie on a leaded Heptagenid hoping the fish won't spook before I can tie it on. We're so close, it can surely hear us breathe. Ever tried casting a leaded nymph accurately with virtually no fly line outside the rod tip? The fly plops in too close, and I can hear Herve tut-tut as the fish scarpers. Herve tells me afterwards that he often resorts to a bow-and-arrow cast in such tight situations. He also confirms what I'm just beginning to realise: the regular uses a fast-action #5-weight rod loaded with #6 lines for this job, which requires ultra-short, accurate casting and backbone to handle powerful fish.

The essence of Herve's approach is to get to where other anglers fear – or cannot – tread. He tells me that the fish are not normally that fussy about flies, but I can vouch that finding and spotting them is another dimension. A guide is essential, not only to locate the fish, but right from the moment you get into the car. Parking and finding your way onto the correct stretches of water is akin to becoming a member of a secret society. The access is a barely visible, silky fox track sliding through the grasses and trees and down the bank.

We wade on, Herve indicating to me the typical terrain he's looking for, where the schist layers that form the river bank slide into the water like slumped stacks of sliced bread. These form barriers and mini-ledges behind which trout lie and they create mini-pools under the trees.

As we advance upstream, adult caddis cascade from the foliage above us, and we spook a trout that was lying tight in the very shallows at the side; so tight, and in such shallow, slack water that one wonders what it was doing there. Then we are distracted again as a fresh, silver sea trout of at least 5lb leaps in the tumbling main current of the river off to our right.

Herve warns me that we are now entering a reserved fishing section. These zones are totally protected from fishing, so we wind in and creep up inquisitively to take a look into the first pool. In front of us is a shallow little appendix of a backwater in the gravel, stuffed with minnows. "Let's just wait", says Herve, and I can see him straining his eyes into where the bay opens out into the main river. "They will sometimes come in and patrol these places looking for fry". Right on cue a shape looms into view.



"It's a double-S fish!" exclaims Herve. All I can see is a fin-perfect brown, and I can see every spot on it.

We watch it swim into the bay, turn and then slide off into the depths of the main river. Herve explains that a double-S fish translates as one that is so big it has to waggle its whole body, like a snake, to propel itself, rather than its tail. I guesstimate it at 4lb.

Herve's short guiding session is over, but it's been a fascinating introduction to a unique style of fly fishing which focuses totally on a band of water generally ignored by 99.9% of anglers. I'm left wondering if my home river can be fished in this same style.

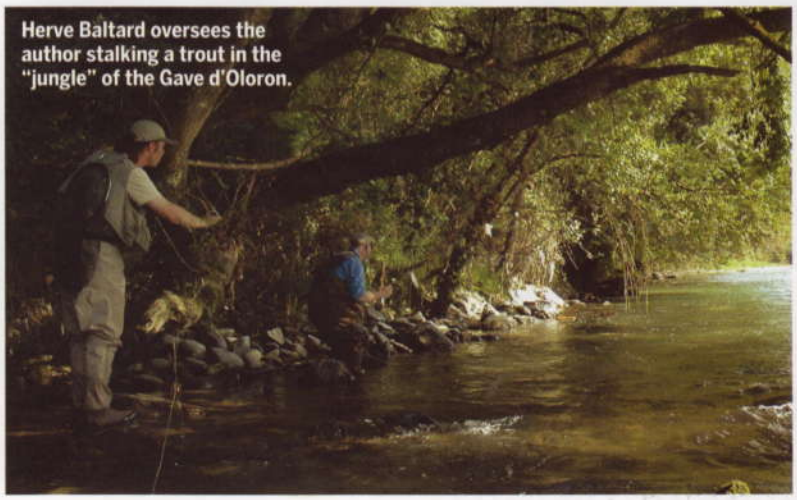
Later, we relax outside at a bar in the quiet square of Naverrenx, an old walled military town which overlooks the Gave d'Oloron, drinking in the balmy evening air with a beer. Herve extends the breadth of his local knowledge to a small restaurant in a hamlet close by, which is run by the former chef of the president.

This is the life, I think to myself.

■ Mark Bowler has fished in many countries but cannot resist the lifestyle that accompanies a French fly fishing venue.

Contacts

- For fishing, guides, accomodation and travel packages in Pays Basque and Bearn, and throughout France contact ClubFishFrance. Tel. 0208 874 6717 (www.clubfishfrance.com).
- Herve Baltar operates a gite and guiding at Sousmiou, near Navarrenx. http:/moulin.aquitain.net


Herve Baltard oversees the author stalking a trout in the "jungle" of the Gave d'Oloron.


Prospecting a pool of the Ossau close to the mountain road.

Into the mountains

Following the source of the Gave d'Oloron takes the angler further south, climbing from the flood plain and into the foothills of the Pyrenees. At Oloron Saint-Marie, the river splits into its two main tributaries, the Aspe and Ossau. Both rivers extend high into the mountain range, becoming ever more steep and rugged, and each is accompanied by an adjacent mountain road. You've probably seen these roads before on the televised mountain stages of the Tour de France. The road they strain to cycle up follows the river, most of which can be all fished on the Peche 64 ticket. In addition, a mass of tiny tributaries herringbone into the system; some of which are good trout fisheries, too.

Gave d'Aspe

Tree-lined with large cobble stones on its bed, the Aspe holds some good trout, but it is an extremely challenging river, due to its extraordinary clarity. It requires stealth and patience, and the best approach is to quietly negotiate the banks, looking for nymphing or rising fish and then casting to them. Outcrops of limestone along its length allow for some quality trout to grow.

Much of the area is used for summer grazing of cattle and brebis sheep, famed for its cheese. Vultures and kites soar above on the thermals, and butterflies, crickets, grasshoppers and shield bugs abound in the surrounding grasses, whilst caddis and olives make up the bulk of the aquatic menu.

Various tributaries can provide great fishing – including the Lourdios – but be aware of the barrages which appear along many watercourses. These can cause drastic surges in flow when the turbines are generating. A swift escape route out of the river is a constant essential, preferably under the guidance of a guide who knows the vagaries of each generating station.

Gave d'Ossau

The Ossau is a jumble of tumbling rock pools on steep descent from a mountain ski resort. Rocks the size of Volkswagen Beetles lie strewn along the gorge valley with intricate foamy currents, stoppers, bends and undercuts. Unlike the Aspe, this river possesses an element of icy turbidity. Here, the fishing is one of prospecting each and every likely lie with a dry fly and then moving on. Herve uses a game palmered dry fly in a size 12 to ride the bubbling current. His rod is held high to keep the line off the main flow water.

As ever, the margins are lined with trees, but narrow pathways often cut through the woods alongside the river bank, so moving from one pool to the next is not so difficult once an access to the river has been made. Generally, the higher one fishes, the smaller the trout. As the mountain stream hits the valley floor, so the fish get bigger and the flows even out.

Saison

The Saison lies further west and joins the Gave d'Oloron much lower downstream. This produces some good fishing, particularly between the towns of Mauleon-Licharre and Tardets-Sorholus, and from there up to the confluence of two streams, the Larrau and the Saint-Engrace.

The Sainte-Engrace is a steep river which has cut deeply gorges into the rock and is well worth visiting, Herve tells me. However, he warns that due to the hydro-dams on this river a guide is an essential element of safety.

Peche64

This permit system is a development of the Pyrenees Atlantiques tourism area (aka: Area 64) which enables locals and visitors access to a huge range of rivers, tributaries and lakes throughout the Pays Basque and Bearn areas – basically an area bounded from Bayonne to Pau to the north and the Spanish border to the south. It is all fishable on one ticket, available from local tourist offices. A map is provided with the ticket which costs €60 for a 15-day holiday permit. The map indicates waters that hold trout and salmon, and those that hold coarse fish, the lakes that are available for fishing, and also features 13 dedicated no-kill sectors for trout fishing.

The map also includes a list of recommended camping sites, gites and hotels that are close to the fishing.

The salmon season starts on March 3, and finishes on the third Sunday in September. Note: the river is closed in August for salmon fishing.



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