RUSSIAN REVELATION

It wasn't meant to be like that. ***Henry Giles*** went to fish the first week of the Kola's 2010 season expecting freezing temperatures but instead encountered massive runs of Varzuga salmon on an early ice-melt

LINE SPUN fast and steady from the tightened drag. The Arctic sun in its noon position was mirrored as a gleam halfway up the 15-footer, which now jagged strongly as a silver ten-pounder pulled the shooting head/running line loop under the waves 15 yards below. The River Varzuga itself, swollen with ice-melt, a quarter of a mile across, filled my field of vision and swung via silver birch and spruce banks round a distant right-hand bend towards the White Sea seven miles away.

Then a disembodied voice from Varzuga guide, Locha. We hadn't talked much, Locha and I, for obvious linguistic reasons but these words we knew and used often through the week: "Good fish?"

"Strong fish."

The Varzuga is the most prolific Atlantic salmon river in the world. A quarter of a million salmon run its 160 miles each season. It is one of the few rivers where you can still expect to catch five to ten salmon in a day. Twenty to 30 salmon per rod per week is normal. Normal!

I was here with Roxtons, whose Varzuga operation does have a quasi-military feel to it. Certainly it is organised down to the last detail and is the jewel in their global fishing crown, the Varzuga being the only operation which, with their Russian partners, they fully staff and organise. Next year will be their 20th.

We had been told to expect temperatures as low as minus six Deg C during this first, mid-May week of the season.

I packed skiing salopettes, and a rather chic line in fingerless gloves. I even took a pair of MuckBoots, the premium neoprenes for that all-important welly-boot-before-breakfast fish, and made good use of them.

Strangely, the point of arranging to go this early, when Brian Fratel had put the trip to me back in February, was that it was going to be extreme fishing. No magazine had covered the first week of the season and it was to be edgy, ice-bound stuff – that was the plan. Long Johns? I took their modern (Hardy & Greys) equivalent.

What I wasn't going to take was a large tub of hi-factor suncream that my wife had bought me. But I did, thank goodness, and shared it all week with Locha who, despite being a special forces soldier returned from operational tour in Chechnya, clearly appreciated the finer things in life!

For despite a severe winter, even by Arctic Russian standards, something extraordinary was happening. A heatwave was beaming down that had only started in the first few days of May. The river ice had broken on May 4, we arrived on the 15th and the river had risen with snowmelt until the day before we arrived.

"It's as wide as the Tay at Ballathie," Brian had told me of Lower Varzuga, and so it was – a great swollen 12-lane motorway of a watercourse.

So on the Saturday, at 4 pm, our group – Alan and Michael (who have fished the Varzuga since its perestroika-era beginnings), Will, Antony and I plus group host Brian – wove our way via lumps of







Roxtons' cheerfully coloured luggage labels. Loading the MI8 for the flight from Murmansk. Helicopter view of Varzuga and two sets of rapids.



"Good fish?" "Strong fish." One on at the Larder, opposite the camp.



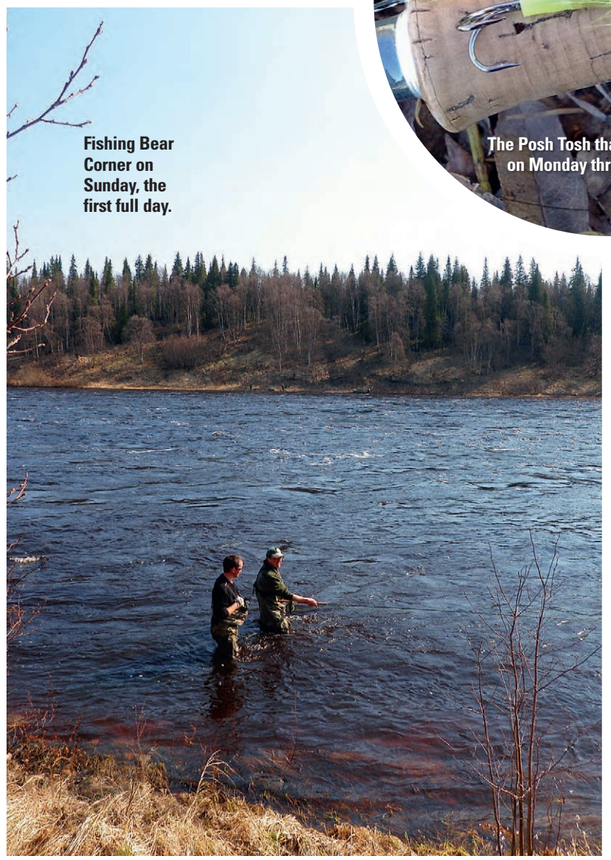
Paradise: the lunch spot at Janaways.



Shirtsleeve fishing near the Arctic Circle in May.



The Posh Tosh that brought 16 fish on Monday through Tuesday.



Fishing Bear Corner on Sunday, the first full day.



Forceps at the ready, a typical Varzuga salmon adds to the party's impressive week-long tally.

rapidly melting snow dotted on the springy tundra grass from the helicopter that had brought us from Murmansk.

I entered the main lodge/dining area which would be our home from home for the next week. Luxury: three-piece suite in front of an open fire with coffee table kitted out with nuts, nibbles and a well-stocked bar.

"The best sofa on the Kola," said Roxtons' Charlie White, who caught my admiring glance. Charlie alternates with Christopher Robinson through the season and was "on" for Week 1. I couldn't argue, momentarily distracted by a magnificent framed colour map of Varzuga that looked down on the scene.

Brian led me up to our twin-roomed wooden chalet spread out with the others' lodgings along a wooden walkway and we put up our rods. Brian handed me a bag of tube-flies from 1¼ in to 2 in he'd very kindly tied for me.

And so, with a falling but still very high river, we went fishing, first of all with Tom, who would be camp manager at Kitza from Week 2.

The first evening I caught nothing. The first full day, a Sunday, and I was on one of the few right-bank pools, Bear Corner, where I hooked a good fish almost immediately.

Then the hook pulled out.

We tried a skagit line for ten minutes, then changed again to a Rio AFS sink 2/3 shooting head (it stayed on all week). Over to the left bank, we beached the boat, waded, then came a splashy take on the dangle. A decent 2 lb sea-trout. Three casts later the reel spun clockwise and line slipped between my fingers and the cork handle. My first Varzuga salmon had taken a green-bodied Black and Yellow tube as it swung in towards sunken shrubbery below me, and now it was pulling…hard.

These fish are springers and newly arrived from their relatively close feeding grounds they fought like tigers.

I clamped my handshake into the damp leather of Locha's glove and stared at the salmon in the net.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," replied Locha and we released the six-pounder.

We were away – later I caught my second fish before dinner (Brian: "You're not going to miss the chance to fish for 30 minutes before dinner now you've lost your Russian virginity? You'll regret it back in England if you don't.")

So it was 20 minutes later, in the same spot I'd not caught one the night before, that I had a lovely insistent tug. Exciting to land the fish on my own.

A slow start, but getting faster. I went out to Russia having caught 22 salmon in my life, and returned with that lifetime number bumped up to 63. By some time on the Wednesday morning I had equalled the 22 of hard-won Scottish (and solitary Norwegian) salmon.

I remember pausing slightly. It's not a numbers game (something Brian was to repeat), but it was a definite moment.

Lower water in subsequent months meant 2010 wasn't to be a vintage year by Varzuga standards, with just under 4,000 salmon to 144 rods (an average year would be 5,500), but our group caught 221 fish in a week of stunning wall-to-wall sunshine.

Top rod Alan caught 60-odd on his copper Ally's and Teeny 300 lines. Will had 50 or thereabouts, others had 30 and more.

All week the water was warming (from 4 Deg C to 10 plus) and dropping. The risk was that fish would run up the middle of the river, out of reach, but instead they seemed to come up the sides, where they increasingly showed close in. Many takes were 25 yards out – strong pulls out in the flow halfway round. Sometimes a fish or two would throw the barbless hooks and then a go-slow would hook them as they took what seemed four yards of line before one pulled back.

Monday dawned. Two fish by lunch and I was high with it. Jess clapped me on the back: "You might get five this afternoon."

In the event I caught ten more, at the red-hot Janaways stretch.

I was losing count, but Locha was noting each fish on the back of my licence. A vivid memory will be the sleeves of my lucky green jumper, wet to above the elbow from returning fish. That and the cranking then dink as the loop to loop of running line to head went back through the tip ring as another neared the net.



Almost all Varzuga salmon are returned. Henry's fish here certainly was...



...and so was this solid salmon caught by Jess from Bear Island. However...



...the party had to eat. Smoke rises at the lunch spot, as Locha prepares salmon in the foil.

It wasn't all fishing. It's nice to take time out, but on the Tuesday morning I had to, with very sore feet. But I enjoyed the leisurely morning.

Charlie showed me round his office – the nerve-centre of the operation and very 007, with serried ranks of the guides' VHF radios charging, a bag of helicopter ear plugs, the iconic, brightly coloured spare camp tags for Middle, Kitza and Pana, hats, life jackets, industrial mosquito repellent, a computer and printer and outside the lollipop-shaped satellite phone mast. Quintessential camp Varzuga!

Somewhere inside was Charlie's tiny bed-space, not as luxurious as our chalets, I'm sure.

Charlie also showed me the



RUSSIAN REVELATION *continued*

Banya, or Russian sauna which I was to use later that day. A galvanised hot bucket thrown over oneself. Nice.

But not before I had gone out that afternoon having met the others for lunch (Antony had caught his first-ever salmon the day before then four more and was going well, and Alan was on his way to a jaw-dropping 16). I managed six. Four in a row dropped off late on, at the tail of Larder. On the last fish I finally lost the Posh Tosh tube on which I'd caught 16 salmon.

A day of ten on Wednesday stood out. I started with my first before-breakfast fish, 6½ lb from Heli.

Then three ten-pounders from the wonderful Moscoi Rapids before lunch and my best of the week, a 12- to 13-pounder. One came to a fly stripped downstream.

Thursday was good, and not for numbers. I had been fishing Bear Island, lovely fly water below the rapids. One took my fly with just 1.5 rod-lengths of line hanging in the stream below. A lovely, pulling two jags of a take – I could feel the fish turn on the fly it was so close. I had three that morning and lost another five or six, many well into the fight, and they fought like fury in the water now warmed to 10 Deg C.

Sounds and images, all iconic. The sound of wood being chopped and the smell of wood smoke. A little later I had just switched rods from the Swift to the very different, but also excellent Orvis Shooting Star with an Angel reel, and I'd soon grassed and returned a seven-pounder. Locha had expertly prepared the (short-line) fish described earlier with a hunting knife of eye-watering proportions and had taken the fish up into the trees above Janaways to the beautiful lunch clearing.

The smoke rose from the sun-dappled trees and my arms were warmed from recent action. It was paradise.

So there it is: the Varzuga; the mood; the fellowship among all those at the camp (the group teased and baited me with great charm and nothing can erase the sight of Will in a full-on Russian fur hat, tweed jerkin and black skin-tight wader leggings arriving for breakfast and charming Jenna and Donna, our excellent cooks).

There among the silver birch and spruce, so close to the Arctic circle, the sea eagles and Arctic terns wheeling overhead, was a deep sense that Varzuga is pristine. You are looking at the world as it once was, you are looking at a resource, the salmon certainly, that is present in the numbers of past millennia. It deserves respect, and the guides returned fish with the utmost care.

Then it was time for church. On the Thursday evening I banya'd and changed into my Sunday best (well, non-fishing clothes) and Charlie and I motored upriver to Varzuga village where we met Locha's mother, a nun, who let us into the 300-year-old church.

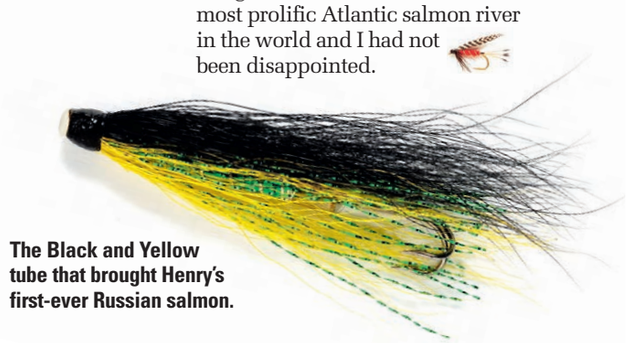
The treasure trove sight inside took my breath away. Row upon row of icons of the Eastern Orthodox church, in gold leaf and hundreds of years old. Into my head came my Varzuga soundtrack – Monteverdi's *Vespers* which before and since takes me there. All right, this wasn't St Mark's basilica, Venice, but the connection was there. Then up to the bell tower where Locha's uncle Oleg rang the bells for us, a stunning experience and a great privilege.

On the last morning before breakfast I caught a welly boot fish on a Jesse black fly threaded in front of a Flamethrower. A lively smaller fish, about 5 lb.

Goodbyes, and lift-off in the MI8. Bonded by the experience, we were all quiet on the chopper, lost in our own thoughts.

It was lovely to be returning to my abandoned family in Cambridgeshire but later, on the flight to Heathrow, I was aware of an extra bolt of happiness lighting deep down in my soul. The Kola's Varzuga had been truly challenging – rewards, yes, but also set-backs, overcome. The week had just been so special on every level but one thing was clear. I had fished the most prolific Atlantic salmon river in the world and I had not been disappointed.

Fish were returned with the minimum of fuss.



The Black and Yellow tube that brought Henry's first-ever Russian salmon.



Left, Varzuga village's 300-year-old onion-spired wooden church, the river beyond. Above: Icons of Varzuga: the jewel box beauty of the interior.

FACTFILE

◎ The Varzuga camp Roxtons run the fishing weeks on Lower Varzuga/Kitza, Middle Varzuga and Pana camps. All are staffed by a western camp manager and western cook. The manager sorts rotas and ensures a comfortable and productive week. Food was delicious, wholesome and abundant, ranging from salmon fish cakes and full-on breakfasts to steak, gourmet fish and chips complete with mushy peas, and a satisfying range of puddings.

◎ Cost From £5,000 per week, including international flights. Roxtons Field Sports, 25 High Street, Hungerford, Berks RG17 0NF +44 (0) 1488 689 701 E-mail fishing@roxtons.com

Roxtons sort Russian Federation visas but this requires some forward planning (3-5 weeks) – and your passport!

◎ Maps Superbly coloured Kola maps (all rivers) are available from Riverside Maps via their website www.illustrated-river-maps.com