

# Postcard

Rob & Libby Sloane



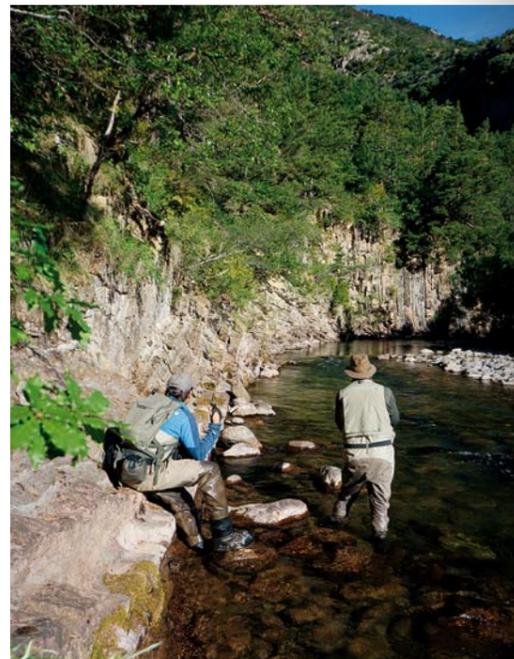
## Tapas & Trout



Iconic scene.



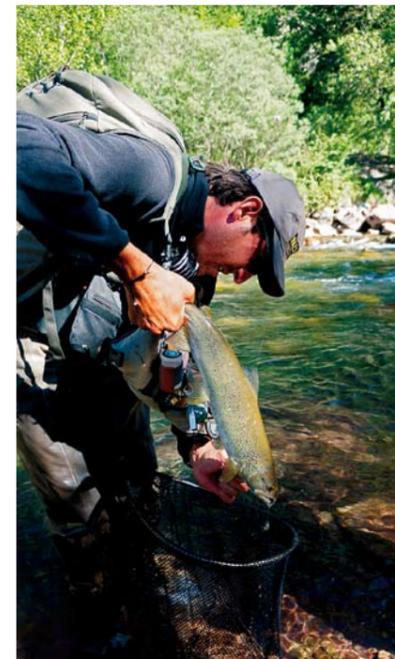
Looking back.



Perfect water.



Alpine lake.



Native brown.



Floral setting.

Having survived two days in Paris and a week at the seaside in the far south of France, I had well and truly earned my part of the bargain—a week's fishing in the Pyrenees, south of the border, in Spain.

A fast train trip had us in Barcelona and then heading towards Pamplona across a flat, parched summer landscape. My only homework was a copy of Hemingway's *Fiesta*, which I started reading on the train with the vague idea that we might be fishing some of the rivers he regarded as the best in Europe.

Ivan Tarin greeted us at the station in Zaragoza and we were in his hands for the next seven days, on a magical mystery tour of his beloved Pyrenees, which appeared unimpressive on the distant horizon. It was a leap of faith but I should not have been concerned. He was mid-thirties, dark haired, clean cut and spoke excellent English. We

chatted comfortably on the two-hour drive into the mountains.

Over wine and tapas the itinerary was sorted and we settled in to Ivan's homely fishing lodge in the village of Santa Cilia, on the banks of the river Aragon. This was to be our base for the first five nights as we focused our attention on the high valleys of the Western Pyrenees, within an hour or so drive on the many long and winding roads and bush trails threading the mountain passes.

Diversity was the agreed objective. Ivan wanted to pack as much as possible into the week, visiting at least two fishing locations each day, including everything from high mountain streams and lakes to trophy tailwater fisheries and weedy 'chalkstreams' further east. To placate the cultural attaché we planned to visit key historical attractions along the way, while also sampling the best of the region's gastronomic delights.

But nothing in fishing goes exactly

as predicted. We had not planned on a weeklong heatwave that pushed temperatures well into the 30s, forcing the anticipated mayfly hatches into retreat. Ivan soon modified our daily routine to account for the heat, with some dawn starts and late evenings on the water compensated by welcome siestas to avoid the punishing heat of the day.

### ALPINE TWIG WATERS

I knew the trout in the headwater streams would be small, but I wasn't expecting to be blown away by the intensity and excitement of catching them, in environments which could best be described as heavenly.

Our first day involved a short 4WD trip and a 40-minute hike into the mountains to fish a remnant brook trout population, a legacy of stocking in the 50s. Later days were spent on waters which held pure strains of Mediterranean brown trout, and others with mixed populations of hybrid

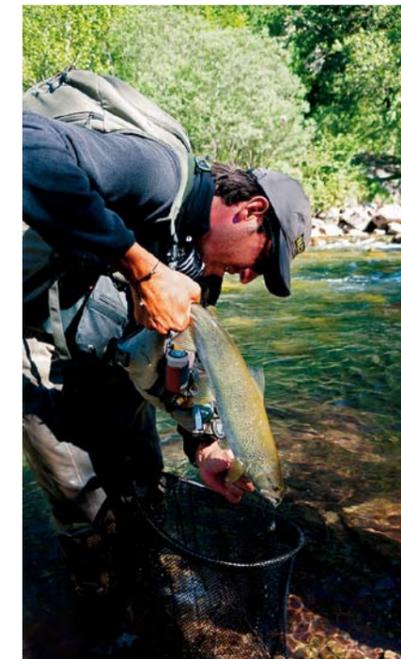
browns resulting from past stocking of rivers with hatchery fish derived from Atlantic stocks.

I have to confess to never spending much time with anything less than my trusty 5-weight lake rod, but the Pyrenees headwaters are a veritable paradise for 'twig-water' enthusiasts. Fortunately I had the sense to pack a borrowed 3-weight, which was perfect for the job. (See 'Gulliver's Trout' on page 38.)

guide. Between cigarettes their verbose exchanges in Spanish usually resulted in a change of fly or leader, more often both. As the fish became more stubborn the leaders became thinner and longer, and the changes more frequent. I enjoyed all of this as it gave me brief respite from heat stress and intense scrutiny.

Ramon loves the high country and constantly surprised us with little gifts of herb leaves or stripped roots

Guide conference.



Native brown.



Floral setting.

to chew and taste. Many familiar varieties were growing wild amongst orchids, poppies, buttercups and clovers in a floral biodiversity that would astound any Australian botanist. When I was finding the going tough Ramon offered me several roots to chew, smiled and simply said, "Coca... Cocaine."

Closer to Santa Cilia, larger rivers lower down in the agricultural reaches offered the prospect of bigger trout and barbel (which also take dries and nymphs at times). These beats were more like the rivers of rural Southland (NZ), or Victoria's north east, and the fishing here was more technical and hatch driven.

Ivan Tarin is a master at changing flies and leaders to suit every conceivable circumstance. He was an excellent tactician and instructor, ever willing to sharpen my rusty riverine skills with gentle words of encouragement and reminders whenever I lapsed into stillwater mode.

His fellow guides were also first rate. We enjoyed wonderful times with the enthusiastic Inaki and the experienced Ramon, though we often had to resort to sign language, facial contortions and a crude mix of Anglo-French and pidgin Spanish to make sense of our conversations. Often we were accompanied by more than one



Colourful brookie.



Weedy chalkstream.



## Postcard

... continued

nothing but small trout. Albums of photos he showed us were spilling with trophy browns and rainbows, worthy of any South American brochure. These were tailwater fisheries, designated catch-and-release, fly-only, with a mix of wild and stocked fish.

With the hatches quietened by the persistent dry heat, Ivan was still confident that we could lure some big fish with streamers. The flies embedded in the roof lining above my head in



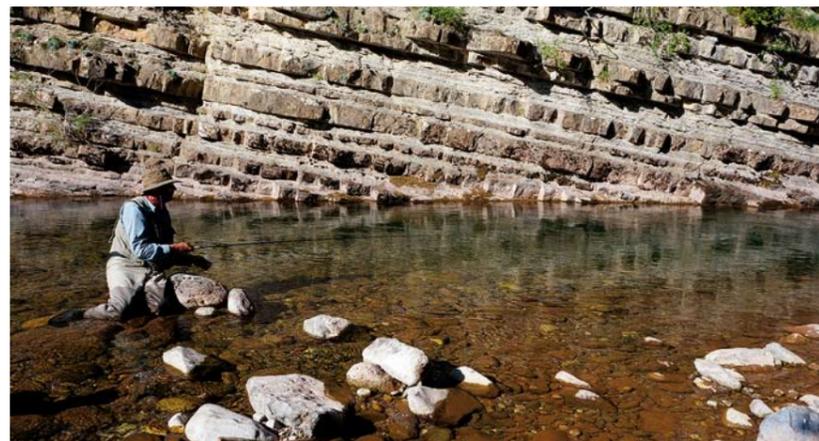
Tailwater rainbow.

the car smacked of Patagonia: huge Woolly Buggers with cone heads and rubber legs.

Attempting to cast them on my 5-weight with any delicacy seemed impossible. More so when he suggested I swing them deep under the shade of overhanging bushes in narrow torrents where a wall of trees behind prevented any sort of back cast.

When I became too hot and bothered to follow instructions I just gave him the rod and he demonstrated with a frenetic display of precision roll casts and bow-and-arrow flicks. When he suggested a sinking leader and tandem 'streamers' to counteract the swift current, I rolled my eyes. When I finally hooked a huge rainbow that we spied lurking in the shadows, all we could do was laugh when it cart-wheeled and bolted headlong downstream around several tight tree-lined bends before throwing the hook. This was seriously crazy fishing.

The day was saved by a late session on Ivan's 'Lost River'. It was the perfect stream, flowing cold and fast and clear between swaying hips of aquatic plants, its banks shielded from the late sun by an avenue of deciduous trees. It promised so much.



Technical fishing.

The trout we caught were bright and fat as butter, but the trophy browns eluded us, thanks to a giant otter intent on fishing the same pool. Ivan cursed the interloper that had put an end to our fishing, but I was awestruck and totally elated, having never seen such a magnificent creature in the wild—it was the size of a small seal!

### LAST STAND

By the last day we had moved further east and had settled into Can Boix, a luxury hotel complete with swimming pool, tennis court and waiters dressed in penguin suits. Despite the formality it was the most restful place we had stayed on our European travels. But a river nearby in the valley beckoned, and there was time for one last stand. Ivan had given me up as a dry-fly nut and took his own rod to prove the effectiveness of his heavy-handed

streamer approach. The photographer said she had taken enough pictures of my bum in waders, ordered another gin-and-tonic and headed for the swimming pool.

Another big tailwater, this river was fast and clear, almost too big to wade. The evening hatch was a non-event but I persisted with the dry, catching two small browns, until Ivan, further downstream, whistled at me and hoisted his third big fish in the net. When I waded down to photograph it he convinced me to give up the dry and to fish like a man.

He soon had a sinking leader and Patagonian streamer rigged on my 5-weight and was telling me exactly where to cast, when to mend, when to feed out loose line, and when to dead-drift the fly back across a complexity of currents.

It was an invigorating final session, full of rivalry and good humour, as we fished together, each banking several big rainbows with as many fought and lost on barbless hooks in the strong flow. He had proved his point, and I could understand what he was telling me about this big river with its trophy browns and rainbows and high-class lodgings being ideal for his North American clients. I could see the possibilities when the mayfly, caddis and stonefly hatches are in full swing, but my heart was lost somewhere, in the high mountain streams further west.

I couldn't forget our treks through unspoiled forests of pine and beech to reach those floral meadows with their clanging cowbells and babbling brooks. Where we disturbed marmot, rebeco, partridge, and admired eagles and vultures in flight, and where I discovered the delights of featherweight tackle and brightly spotted mountain trout. **RI**

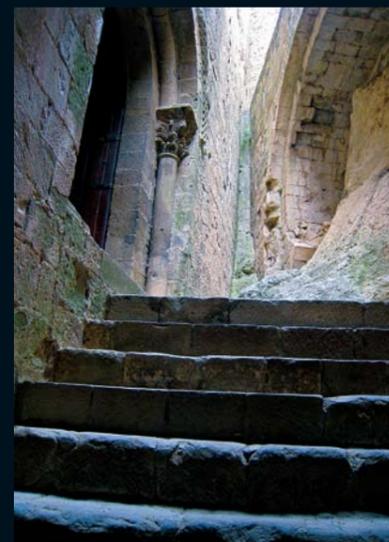
## TOURING THE PYRENEES



Nearly there.

### ACCESS & LICENCES

Although we were well prepared for trekking, it was a privilege to be driven beyond locked gates along narrow, winding trails, though we did feel a tad guilty when our picnic table complete with tablecloth, napkins, wine bottles and glasses was viewed with envy by sweaty pilgrims and foot-weary backpackers high on the mountain trails. Although most waters in Spain are public fisheries, the licensing, permit and beat allocation system is laboriously complex and difficult for any visiting angler to negotiate. Ivan arranged all this on our behalf for each day's fishing, which was fortunate because our licences were checked several times.



Loarre Castle.

### DID I MENTION THE FOOD?

Accommodation was very comfortable, relaxed and informal. At the lodge in Santa Cilia, Vali the cook prepared delicious meals and packed-lunches, which were complemented by pre-arranged lunches and dinners at other chosen venues, with an emphasis on fresh local produce and traditional cuisine (paella, milk-fed lamb, Iberian ham, Catalan tomato bread, wild herbs, mushrooms, truffles). Highlights included a lunch at Casa Pelentos, Sandiniés, and a tapas degustation at Casa Domenc, where we stayed in Aren—our host Juan Antonio spoilt us with wonderful wine too.



Tapas time.

### PACKAGES

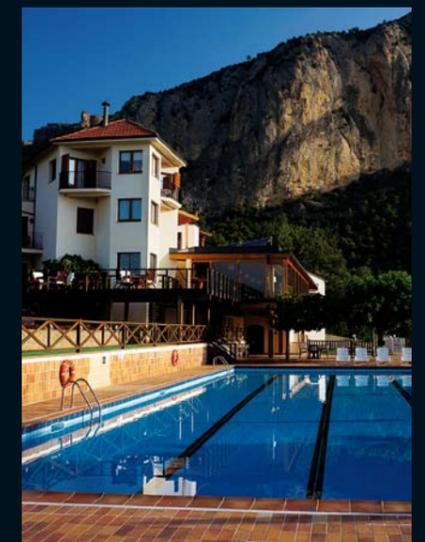
Salvelinus Fishing Adventures offers everything from 'extreme' (high mountain camp-outs and serious trekking) to laidback touring and gastronomy packages. The latter offer a way of sampling everything Pyrenees without the stress of driving, navigating, or panicking to find suitable places to fish, to sleep and to eat in a region with endless possibilities. Three days would be an absolute minimum to experience the best this region has to offer, with a full week tour from West to East the recommended program to consider. Non-fishing partners can't fail to enjoy this mix. And don't forget your 3-weight.



Alpine village.

### CULTURAL HERITAGE

If you have any shred of religious sensibility you will be awestruck by the medieval frescos preserved in the Diocesan Museum within the Cathedral at Jaca. The monasteries of San Juan de la Pena are another must on any pilgrimage—built into a cavern under a sheer face of rock, the original 10th century site has a Godly serenity. For a real taste of the ancient Kingdom of Aragon, the Castle of Loarre built on ramparts of solid rock is incredibly well preserved, likewise the citadel at Jaca and the medieval village at Montanana, with its stone bridge and archways and cobbled streets, where we wandered for half an hour but could have spent half a day.



Can Boix.

[www.salvelinus.com](http://www.salvelinus.com)