

Here's a copy of the trip report that I filed with **THE ANGLING REPORT**

### IT'S ABOUT THE FISHING

On October 15-17 I fished with Salvelinus, [www.salvelinus.com](http://www.salvelinus.com), a fly-fishing outfitter that specializes in the Pyrenees Mountains in Northern Spain. Salvelinus, now in its eleventh year, has two bases of operation: a lodge in Santa Celia, not too far from Pamplona, and an inn/hotel in Aren, a small town to the east. Because I arrived relatively late in the season Ivan Tarin, the company's founder and head guide, recommended the latter venue in order to take advantage of the better fishing waters in the valleys that extend down from the mountains.

Ivan likes to fish. When he learned that I was arriving from Switzerland, and not an overnight flight from the US, he offered to take me fishing on the way to the hotel. Following standard operating procedure Ivan picked me up at the train station in the provincial capital of Lleida (that's the Catalan name; it's Lerida in Spanish). After half an hour's drive, we entered a gorge on the Rio Noguera Ribagorzana just below a big dam. Following a streamside lunch, it was dry-fly fishing for brown trout and rainbows. In some of the slow water this was classic sight fishing; as we moved downstream it became casting to the likely spots and hoping a fish would bite. This was a slow afternoon, with a couple of strikes but no fish landed. So we moved downstream, to a brush-lined bank requiring a hair-raising crossing. I had only brought waist-length waders and I just made it across as dry as I started.

Fishing here was completely different – a dry and a dropper, with the dry functioning strictly as an indicator. The river here was only about ten meters across and very shallow in spots, with abundant riffles and currents full of the fasting-striking trout I've ever encountered. If I didn't set the hook at the first twitch of the dry I didn't get a fish. Browns and rainbows inhabit this stretch, and I caught a few in the 25-35 cm range (doesn't that sound so much larger than 10-14 inches!). As darkness began to fall I switched to a dry and picked up an occasional riser.

We drove to the tiny town of Aren, about an hour from the river. Accommodations were, a hotel with which Salvelinus works offering services like a Lodge, in a more or less standard double room with private bath, including a steam sauna. After cleaning up we walked two blocks to the town square for dinner at the hotel's "fonda," or restaurant. This looked very plain and was packed with villagers playing cards and telling stories. Food and wine were anything but plain, however. We began with some wine and tapas in the wine cellar, then moved upstairs for dinner. And dinner (this night and the following two) was nothing short of outstanding – several traditional Spanish first courses followed by a choice of entrée and dessert, all beautifully presented by Juan Antonio, the owner/chef, and all delicious. The dishes varied from evening to evening, though a cannelloni-type pasta was included every night. I remember especially two dishes (on different nights) made with bacalao (salt cod), a particular favorite of mine, and some lightly fried vegetables, but everything was tasty. All accompanied by excellent young Spanish red wines, many from the region.

Friday's fishing took place on the Lost River, a spring creek not far from another small town. Rarely more than ten meters across and located within a small forest, this stream is a collection of pools and holding water for some good-sized fish. And brush everywhere, limiting back casts and accurate presentations all day long. We alternated between a streamer and double nymph rigs (taking two rods to facilitate changing over). After a slow start I caught fish throughout the day, most of them coming in a couple of pools protected by overlying tree branches. The largest of perhaps a dozen fish landed was a brown about 50 cm (20 inches) long and well fed, sight-fished with a nymph. Ivan was emphatic in his instructions on this stream: the fish don't spook (allowing us to get close to the honey holes); they take hard, requiring an aggressive hook set (I was reminded of this through the day too, by Ivan and the fish); and they don't move very far for a meal. A couple of centimeters can mean the difference between a fish and a lovely but non-producing drift. He also said that one client had hooked (but alas not landed) a ten-pound rainbow in one of the holes. (Ivan's net has a scale with Imperial measures, so he thinks in pounds not kilos). This river, by the way, is rarely fished; Ivan and friends reserve it for non-European anglers to keep it that way.

Saturday was the big river . This meant a drive across two passes and valleys and a very early (6.45 am) start from Aren to get to the river for the early morning dry fly action. On good days the big fish will "attack" (Ivan's word) a dry, chase it across a fair distance. We arrived on just such a good day, though little catching early on. I missed a pair that walloped the fly and the other angler missed six. As the sun came over the mountains fish started to rise and the fishing changed to stalking the risers and probing current lines. Now the fish "ate" instead of "attacked," much gentler takes. In one two-hour stretch I landed eleven fish, two (one brown and one rainbow) larger than 60 cm (24 inches) and all big, healthy trout. When things slowed down we switched guides. Ramon (little English but still a very helpful guide) moved to a deeper section of the river for some streamer fishing, and here I caught my largest fish of the trip, a fat rainbow about 65 cm (26 inches), using a sinking line and big green sparkle bugger.

When things slowed down in the afternoon we broke for lunch. Like every other meal lunches were delicious and substantial, more than I could handle – ham, chorizo, salad, and the angler's choice of sandwich, washed down with beer or wine. Fishing resumed for a couple of hours (more streamers for me) until Ramon announced that the fish had quit for the day.

Most of the dries we used on all the waters were hoppers patterns, size 6 to 12, and occasionally other attractors. Nymphs were standard PTs, scuds, and shrimp. Ivan changes flies frequently trying to find exactly what the fish are keying on. My three venues were all posted catch and release.

This was all terrific fishing – challenging, varying, and highly rewarding. Definitely as challenging as most of my usual venues in the Rockies. The Lost was especially technical, as I had to experiment with different casting methods to get a drag-free drift under the overhang. Long casts aren't needed, but accuracy and presentation are, even with nymphs and streamers.

I wouldn't rate any of the venues as especially pretty; we were after all in the foothills not the Pyrenees themselves, more farm or grazing land than mountain streams. Ivan is extraordinarily knowledgeable about each river (each corner of each river) and he is indefatigable when there are fish to be found. We fished until dark the first two days, and on the Lost River didn't even break for lunch. Ivan fetched our sandwiches from the car and carried them in his pack – no time away from prime time on the river. As I say, he likes to fish. This is a very appealing "Work hard, play hard" ethic that characterized Salvelinus's entire operation. I didn't spend much time doing much except fishing and eating. When the fishing is hot and the food and companionship are terrific, though, what more do you need when on vacation?

While I wouldn't recommend my particular itinerary to anyone not in good physical shape, I'm sure Ivan and friends would accommodate less well-conditioned anglers. (In fact on the way home from the big river Ivan scouted river access for a disabled client arriving the following week.) I brought my boots and waders and a 4-weight and a 6-weight rod; Ivan supplied the rest.

After dinner Saturday night Ivan invited us all (two other guides and three other anglers) to his apartment for a drink, so he could tempt us with pictures of the high mountain fishing available in summer. Many of the streams are reached after a hike, some only by helicopter. I can't wait to return. Some waters are in France or Andorra, a tiny country between France and Spain.

Non-angling pursuits such as hiking, sight-seeing, and golf are available too. Incidentally, Salvelinus doesn't take credit cards; payment in advance (50% on booking, the balance 45 days before the trip starts) by bank transfer is required. Both lodges are easily accessible by the high speed "AVE" trains that run every couple of hours between Barcelona and Madrid, and the Santa Celia lodge is near Pamplona airport.

**Rychard G. Lyon. Texas**