

Old World, New Frontiers



The Spanish Pyrenees offer stunning scenery, a culture steeped in history, and an unpublicized trout fishery that rivals the American West.

story by Philip Monahan / photography by Sandy Hays

The diesel Volkswagen van chugged upward through the switchbacks as we climbed into the low-hanging clouds. Soon we couldn't even see the rain-soaked green valley below, and our world became focused on the steep, rutted farm path in front of us. Occasionally, a group of cows blocked our progress, their bells clanging loudly in the stillness, and Ivan would creep forward to avoid pushing one off the edge. The end of the road was a saddle between two peaks, and when we hopped out, the air was damp and cold. As we donned fleece and raingear, Sandy and I exchanged skeptical looks: Could there really be a trout-filled spring creek up here? Smiling as always, Ivan seemed undeterred by the conditions and disappeared over the far edge of the saddle, beckoning for us to follow.

The Pyrenees of northern Spain contain some of the most remote areas in Western Europe. Here the author and friends hike into a steep canyon in search of brook trout.

We clambered down a rocky path, but our destination was still obscured by the clouds. Slowly, a single meander came into view, and further descent revealed a stream snaking through a gorgeous meadow that stretched off into the distance. It looked a lot like the Upper Lamar River in Yellowstone National Park, and I practically started salivating at the prospect of casting dry flies to an endless series of outside bends and undercut banks.

Ivan gave me a yellow-legged grasshopper imitation and then walked downstream to see how Sandy was doing.

My third cast produced a strike, which I missed, but soon thereafter I landed a little 10-inch wild brown with beautiful spots decorating its sides. As Sandy and I hopped through the bends, we found trout right where they should be—along outside curves, in deep eddies, and beneath cutbanks. Most of the fish were in the 10- to 12-inch range, although we caught a few up to 14, and their strikes were lightning fast.

When we had arrived, the clouds hovered just a few hundred feet above us, offering no view of our surroundings. I

was so focused on the water in front of me that I hadn't noticed the ceiling rising, until Sandy yelled to me from downstream.

"Hey! Look behind you!"

I turned around and was astounded to see that the meadow sat at the bottom of a majestic bowl created by craggy peaks, their sides still dotted by patches of snow. According to Ivan, the stream originates from a spring that pours from some rocks above the end of the meadow, which explains the fertility of the water and the number of fish it supports. At the bottom end of the meadow, the stream tumbles over two high waterfalls on its way to the valley floor far below. It's one of the more beautiful places I've ever fished, and we continued catching trout until Ivan had to drag us away so we could still make it back to the lodge for a very late dinner.

The rainbows in Spain may have been stocked, but their color and musculature suggested they'd lived wild for awhile (left). The brook-trout waters reminded the author of home.



Doubting Thomas

This was my second trip to Spain in as many years with Sandy Hays, my high school buddy and sometime photographer. In June 2009, we'd fished around the city of León and then traveled to the mountains of La Rioja to attend the annual *Encuentros Internacionales de Pesca del Río Najerilla* (Najerilla River International Fishing Meeting), an event that brings together prominent anglers, fly-fishing writers, shop owners, and travel agents from around the country to explore the angling and cultural opportunities of the area. Although we'd had a fantastic time, the fishing hadn't been much to write home about—mostly because our timing was too late for the good hatches around León and too early for the frigid mountain waters of La Rioja—so we wanted to explore a different part of the country with more, and hopefully better, angling opportunities.

I'd been corresponding for a couple years with Ivan Tarin, who runs an outfitting business called Salvelinus Fishing Adventures in the Spanish Pyrenees. The fishing that he described—casting on tumbling mountain rivers and streams to big browns, rainbows, and brookies—sounded more like what you'd find in the American West than you would in any European destinations I'd heard about. So, to be honest, I didn't really believe him. And my skepticism was understandable: I'd been in the fly-fishing business in one way or another for more than fifteen years—ten years as editor of this magazine—yet I had never heard *anyone* say that there is great trout fishing in Spain.

But Ivan was persistent, sending me brochures and testimonials, e-mailing pictures, and simply refusing to go away. He believed he was sitting on something that the rest of the angling world needed to know about. So Sandy and I set off during the second week in June to discover if there was really a great "new" trout destination in the heart of the Old World.

Plan B Success

We flew into Madrid and caught the high-speed AVE train to Zaragoza, about 200 miles to the northeast. Ivan and guide Zach Laporte, an expatriate from Mas-



The author (right) and guide Ivan Tarin show off a fine brown that fell for a streamer on the first day. The author (left) and guide Ivan Tarin show off a fine brown that fell for a streamer on the first day.

achusetts, met us at the station. Although Ivan speaks excellent English, it was nice to have Zach there to translate subtle or complicated expressions. As is par for the course whenever Sandy and I travel anywhere, weather was a problem; an inordinate amount of rain over the previous two weeks had blown out many of the best rivers in the area, so our trip would begin not at the main lodge but at Salvelinus's eastern base, a hotel in the small farming community of Aren. Between these two locations, Ivan and his crew can choose from more than 80 rivers, streams, and lakes—which means that they can always find fishable water, even when conditions are bad.

We'd come east to try our luck on a tailwater that would be unaffected by the rains, and our first day of fishing began just below a large dam spanning a lovely stone canyon. The water was clear and cold, and a deep boulder-strewn channel flowed along the far side of the river. Because the nights had been frigid, Ivan admitted that he didn't expect much morning activity, so we started with a streamer on a sinking-tip line to see if we could get a few fish moving. After about an hour of casting, I had made it downstream to where the channel tailed out, when I felt a solid strike. The fish ran hard toward a boulder in deeper water, and I had to apply serious pressure to

turn it. When Ivan finally lifted the net, we had our first Pyrenees brown, a lovely 15-incher with two rows of red spots, but almost no black ones, along its sides.

We hopped back into the van and headed downstream to a *Zona de Pesca Especial Trofeu* (special trophy area), where the river took on a completely different character, with thick bushes crowding both banks. The only way to fish it was to wade right down the center, dropping the streamer into eddies and beneath overhanging limbs. With so little room, casting was tough, but I rarely needed to throw more than 10 or 15 feet of line. Things started slowly again, but I had a really good feeling when we came upon a deep, shaded eddy the size of a kitchen sink. On my third cast—practically onto the bank—a nice rainbow hammered the fly and launched itself into the air.

Because the bushes were so close and there was nowhere to bring the fish to shore, I had to fight and land it from midcurrent. Ivan immediately got downstream of me with the net, as I tried to steer the trout away from the tangle of roots and branches along the bank. When Ivan ended the battle with a deft swoop of the net, I was surprised to see how fat the rainbow was. About 16 inches long, the fish had a girth that suggested these were food-rich waters.

After lunch—which in Spain usually happens between three and four in the afternoon and includes plenty of wine—



If You Go

TRAVEL Once you've flown into Madrid, you can either catch a connecting flight to Zaragoza or hop on the high-speed train, which takes about an hour and a half. (You'll need to take a cab across town to get from the airport to the train station.) In Zaragoza, someone from Salvelinus will meet you, and then it's about a two-hour drive to the lodge.

EQUIPMENT A 4-weight for dry flies and a 6-weight for nymphs and streamers should be all you need for rods. Bring a selection of loop-to-loop sinking tips for fishing streamers at different depths. We did go as small as 6X tippets, but more commonly, 5X got the job done. The fish don't seem to be leader shy when it comes to streamers, so 2X is fine. A fairly standard selection of trout flies is all you need, including some terrestrials and attractor patterns. Depending on the timing of your trip, Ivan can offer specific suggestions.

GEAR Plan for weather extremes. In a single day, you can go from fishing in your shirtsleeves to layering against cold and wind. Even when it's 80 degrees at the lodge, the high-mountain areas might be closer to freezing.

SEASONS Salvelinus operates from March through November, although Ivan will take clients at any time through the winter if conditions are right. The best time for dry fly fishing is in May or June, and prime time for the high-mountain waters is July and August.

CONTACT Orvis Travel (1-800-547-4322; orvis.com/salvelinus). Most of the staff at Salvelinus speaks English, which is a big help for making travel plans and dealing with day-to-day questions. —P.M.

we tried yet another spot on the same river that offered different challenges yet again. This time, it was a wide spot in the riverbed, where the main current flowed through large patches of reeds. There was no surface activity, so Ivan suggested a dry-and-dropper rig featuring a dark mayfly dry and a beadhead Pheasant Tail. We immediately began picking off 8- to 10-inch browns on the nymph, and as we moved upstream, trout started to rise ahead in a pool where the river made a sharp turn.

Over the next couple hours, we landed a few more browns, both on the dry and the nymph, but we couldn't tempt any of the larger fish that came to the surface infrequently—usually in lies made difficult by conflicting currents. After a dozen or so drifts along one seam between fast and slow water, I was ready to give up, when the dry fly paused almost imperceptibly. Although I had little confidence that it was a fish, I raised my rod tip, and we were all surprised to see a 17-inch rainbow take flight. It was a fine end to a great first day, especially considering that we'd been fishing the *backup* river because of water conditions to the west.

We spent two more days in the eastern Pyrenees as we waited for things to clear up in the waters around the main lodge. The highlight of the second day was casting to a pod of rising yet finicky trout at dusk in a wide, flat pool above a bridge. The only

way to present a fly involved a quartering downstream cast, followed by a dead drift. I managed to land one beautiful brown of about 14 inches, and Zach took an even bigger rainbow. After a tour through the mountains on day three, we headed west to the Salvelinus HQ in Santa Cilia.

Embarrassment of Riches

The main lodge is in a 15th-century stone building on the banks of the Aragon River. Santa Cilia itself is a quaint little village of about 200 people and no more than a dozen streets built around a beautiful stone church. The location is strategic for Ivan because it offers access to several river valleys flowing out of the Pyrenees, putting about 800 miles of river and thirty lakes within an hour's drive.

The next morning we headed up into the mountains, where it was overcast and cold, passing through villages and stopping along the way for pastries and coffee at a bar owned by a friend of Ivan's. When we eventually waded into the river, the water was high and the current was really racing. Ivan tied on a tandem nymph rig, with the dropper attached to the tag end of a surgeon's knot. He warned me that these trout could spit a fly very quickly, so I would have to strike with equal speed. When the indicator went under within five minutes, I threw my rod tip to the air and was fast to my first Pyrenees striped brown trout.

Ivan had told us about striped trout, and when he held the eight-inch fish up for inspection, it had four wide bands of black running vertically on its sides. A Mediterranean variant of the standard *Salmo trutta*, striped trout are native to the region and seem to favor higher, faster streams than the non-striped browns that may be descendants of long-ago stockings. Ivan and his guides seemed to prize striped trout above all others in the same way that I love the native brookies in Vermont. For them, a 15-inch "striped" was a more impressive trophy than a 20-inch "regular" brown.

We slogged upstream against the fast current for the rest of the morning, catching four or five striped trout along the way, until Ivan declared it was lunchtime and took us to a riverside restaurant, where we feasted on *migas de pastor*, a traditional shepherd's meal of bread crumbs fried with ham, and chorizo. With warm bellies and heads a little light from the wine, we set off for the spring creek in the clouds.

For the next couple days, we fished in some of the most stunning places I've ever cast a line and caught fish everywhere. Marcello, a Chilean guide who works for Salvelinus, took us to a high alpine river where rocky peaks towered overhead and the wind blew hard enough that it was sometimes difficult to stand. Off in the distance, a flock of vultures

hopped comically down a slope before they could get airborne to join their compatriots wheeling over some unseen carcass. Where the river entered a small lake, I caught a rainbow so silver and translucent-looking, it didn't seem real.

And on our final day of fishing, we hiked into a remote canyon through which flowed the best mountain brook trout stream I've ever encountered. I felt like I was back home in the Green Mountains, except for the fact that there were so many more trout—one in every pocket or slot you'd expect them to be in. It was dry fly heaven, and at one point, Sandy landed five brookies on six casts.

Convinced

By the end of the trip, I was a true believer. It blew me away that there could be such a wonderful angling destination that I'd never read about or even heard of. The quality of our experience was even more astonishing because we never got a chance to fish some of the better big-fish rivers, which remained blown out. Except for two short articles in the small-circulation, subscription-only *Angling Report*, there has been no U.S. coverage of Pyrenees trout fishing in the past decade, at least. More amazing is that most Spanish people don't seem to be aware of the resource, either. We ran into exactly three other anglers during our time in Spain, and one was a spin fisherman. The vast majority of the time, we had entire rivers or lakes to ourselves. (One reason for this is that, although none of the water we fished was private, Ivan has special permits to drive to some places where others would have to hike in.)

The fishing itself is reminiscent of the American West—although the average size of the fish is smaller—and the mountain scenery is spectacular. But the added romance of the Spanish culture, amazing food and wine, and the sense of history that is apparent everywhere makes the overall experience that much richer. I can't wait to return and sample more of what the Spanish Pyrenees have to offer.

Phil Monahan is a former editor of American Angler who has guided fly fishermen in Alaska and Montana.

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