

# **The Most Famous Atlantic Salmon River in Russia**

## **Ponoi River Trip - "Ryabaga Camp" (September 26 – October 08, 2017)**

### **Background:**

A couple of friends, (brothers) have been fishing the last week of the season at Ryabaga Camp on the Ponoi River for the last five years; this would be their sixth trip. They have been hounding me to get a pass from Frontiers (exclusive agent) for years to join them. I got the go-ahead and a couple friends from Redding were coming along as well, there would be five of us total. I had been hearing and reading about the Ponoi River for better than two decades, since the days of Gary Loomis and Tim Rajeff and was pumped to finally get a chance to see and fish the most famous Atlantic salmon river in Russia.

The ladies at Frontiers that handle the Ponoi; Leigh and Emily were fantastic, professional, and very efficient. Trips on the Ponoi run between \$9,000 and 16,000 a week priced accordingly by historic catch statistics for said weeks. Our week, the last week of the season, is the least expensive... The trip was on!

### **26 SEP 17 - Tuesday:**

My two traveling partners and I left Redding, headed to San Francisco in afternoon. We were going to spend the night at the El Rancho Best Western in Millbrae the night before flying out of San Francisco. . We stopped in Vacaville for dinner at Fuso an Italian restaurant to wait for traffic to die down.

### **27 SEP 17 - Wednesday:**

We are up at 7:00 am, and take a light breakfast at the hotel restaurant before taking 10:30 am shuttle to SFO. Exchange \$400 USD for EUROS. Our flight is on KLM and departs at 1:55 pm. Flying to Amsterdam, with a 4 hour layover, then onto Helsinki, Finland. The flight lasts just under 10 hours. Great service on KLM, the continually feed you and bring water, with wine beer, etc. I watch a couple movies, read some, get a bit of nap and we arrive to the Netherlands on Thursday morning.

### **28 SEP 17 - Thursday:**

The Amsterdam airport is huge with lots and lots of travelers. We grab a coffee walk around a bit, people watch and then make our way to our gate, only to have to go through passport control. We later find out that this passport control at the Amsterdam Airport fulfills our entry into Finland. The plane is about half full more food, more beverages... ALL the KLM people we have met are very nice, can't do enough for you, including checking our rod tubes all the way through from SFO, free of charge...

We arrived Helsinki on time; despite the departure delay as the pilot put more fuel on and sped up to make it on time – that never happens in the States. We disembark the plane and head to baggage claim. There is NO passport control on entering Finland from the Netherlands that was handled in Amsterdam - an agreement between certain EU countries - wow! Our luggage is first off the plane and a Frontiers Representative is there in baggage claim "Marjalisa Bjorkbom" to meet us.

If you have nothing to claim, you walk out the door. A driver in a very nice large Mercedes van is waiting for us; we load up and head to downtown Helsinki and the Hotel Haven a 30 minute drive.



Hotel Haven downtown Helsinki Finland

The report from last week on the Ponoï was 900 fish landed for 14 anglers. The run is about a month late, which plays into our hand, and there are big bright fall run Atlantics, called “Osenkas” pouring into the river. Weather is supposed to be decent, with low thirties and mid-fifties with overcast and partly cloudy days. We hope for the best!

There are about 600,000 residents in Helsinki proper, with a 1.5 million total in surrounding towns and suburbs. Total population for country 6.5 million, total length of country 1,500 kms. The Hotel Haven has very nice, large rooms, very modern and clean and quite reasonable. The country is clean, NO garbage can be seen anywhere on the drive into town, zero – amazing... We meet down in lobby at 7:30 for a light bite to eat, end up finding a tiny Russian Bistro next to the hotel for blinis caviar, pickled herring, mushrooms, with sour cream and onions, very different, but good, fun time. We are all super tired and head off to bed for much needed rest. Tomorrow we will explore Helsinki on our own (by foot) and have dinner with the brothers.



Helsinki is a beautiful old world city

### **29 SEP 17 - Friday:**

Slept like a stone, but up at 6:00 am, it is 8:00 pm back home. We all enjoy a very nice breakfast at Hotel Haven part of the package, everything you can think of and more.... We take a 3 hour walk around the city and harbor, very cool, great architecture, super clean, nice people. On a recommendation, we visit the Stockmann Department store including grocery store very cool and an amazing display of meats and fish along with vegetables. We have lunch at a nice little restaurant on the Esplanade (city park and greenspace) in the center of town. We are to meet the others in the lobby for cocktails then out to dinner with reservations at 7:00 pm. We retire to our rooms for a nap. The walk from the Hotel Haven, up the Esplanade, to the restaurant took about 20 minutes. The air is nice and crisp, low fifties. It's Friday night and lots of people are out and about. The restaurant specializes in Lapland food and called Lappi Iravintola. We check out of the hotel this night as to not have to worry about it tomorrow morning. The bus is to depart for the hotel at 5:30 am.

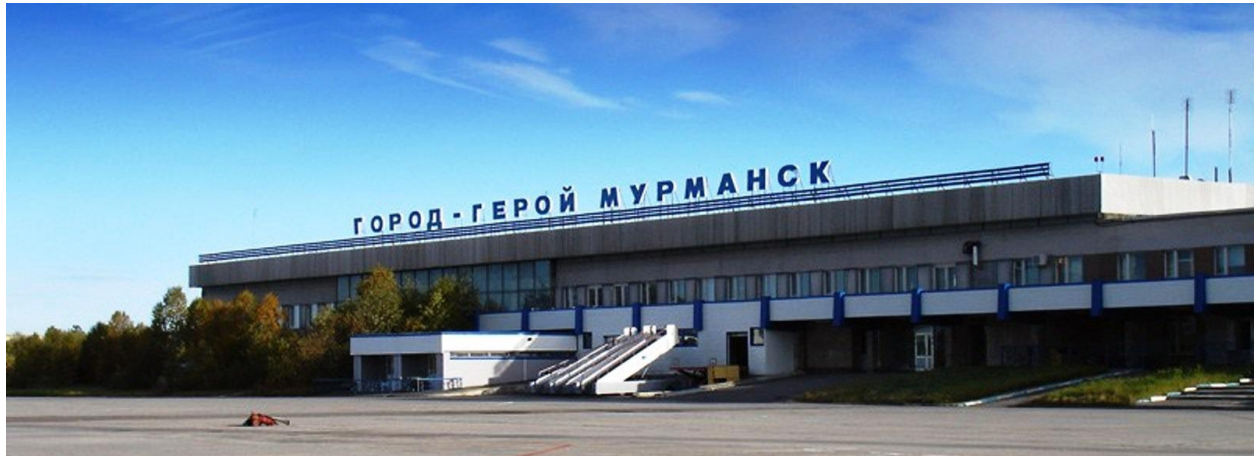
### **30 SEP 17 - Saturday:**

Up at 4:30 am and down in the lobby at 5:00am. They have coffee, fruit, and croissants for us - nice touch. The driver is there on time 5:30 am and we load up and drive to the airport to catch our Finn Air charter to Murmansk. At the airport is Marjalis with a cart, her son with her. We go to the counter, check our luggage, and secure a boarding pass. Clearing security is easy, fast and efficient. Next we clear passport control, super-fast and easy and head to our gate. There are 9 of us total, we meet two Brits, and two other fellows. We board a bus and head to the plane, a sixty passenger twin turbo-prop ATR72-500/ 68 seats. We have the run of the plane, lots of room. The flight lasts 2 hours and 30 minutes. They serve wraps as snacks, coffee, water, liquor, sodas, etc.

Next stop Murmansk, clear immigrations and customs - super easy and fast, quicker than PKC. We are escorted outside the airport and walk a few hundred yards to a VIP waiting area where there are snacks, drinks, etc. The wait is about 45 minutes, and then we walk to a bus and drive to the helicopter. All our gear has been loaded down the middle of the helicopter and we board and sit on padded bench seats, headed for Ryabaga Camp. It's a 1 hour and 55 minute flight in MI8 to camp, above a blanket of clouds. Land safely and are greeted by a slew of staff. Joaquin the Camp Manager assigns cabins (all singles) to guests, I am in 8A and Toño, from Spain, my fishing partner for the week in 8B. Immediately two guides show up and start rigging our rods, while our luggage is delivered to our cabins. Skagit heads and T-14 tips 10 – 15 foot with 20 pound Maxima tippet and



tube flies, Snealdas on heavy (brass or copper) tubes. Next another guide snaps a picture of Toño and I that is hung on a board with our names. They have pictures with names of all the staff on the board with our pictures next to them, nice touch. We unpack; Toño is hot to hit the river on the “Home Pool”, along with 4 others. After unpacking, I head down to the river to watch the guys fish and take a few photos.



Murmansk Airport

The cabins are very nice, all wood constructed, (tongue and groove siding) full size bed, full bathroom (sink and vanity) toilet and single shower with shower curtain, night stand, desk with chair, lounge chair, dresser, big front window and hardwood floors. The cabins are built on a hill, above the main camp on a hill looking down upon the river, which you can't see due to trees and staff building. 24 hour full electricity and radiant heater on wall in bedroom and bathroom completes each room. Each bathroom has its own electric on-demand water heater. They provided shampoo, soap, plenty of towels, bottle water, although the tap water is safe to drink, it comes from a deep well.

Fishing last week was exceptional and the guides think this week will be even better - amazing and everyone is jacked up! The water has dropped from last week and looks fishy... Early dinner at 6:00 pm on the first night. In the main tent (lodge) is a bar, tackle shop and two long dining tables, all set for the evening meal. The morning schedule is earlier than normal with breakfast at 7:00 am and departure at 8:00am. I am fishing with Toño and Juan as our guide, fishing two beats close to the lodge Gold Beach and Hallway. Dinner was very good; soup to start, then a salad and Argentine beef (rare) with vegetables and potatoes, with a raspberry tart for dessert and good Argentine Malbec. Joaquin did a nice orientation and introduced ALL the staff. Max is head guide and did a nice overview of the fishing and conditions...



**01 OCT 17 - Sunday:**

First day of fishing and I am excited... Got up early, 5:30 am, read a bit then made my way down to the dining tent. They lay out quite the spread for breakfast, coffee in heated cups over the wood stove, hot milk, hot water for tea, granola, fruit, cereal, yogurt, porridge, toaster for toast, juices, cook to order eggs and bacon, croissants, jams, butter honey, you name it. Breakfast is officially served at 7:00 am, but they take care of early risers. The temperature is quite nice in the morning,



with overcast skies and about 40°. There is good Wi-Fi 500 MB's per person limit. There is also a large MAC in the dining tent for use to check email and such.

**Tackle note:** As usual, the guides have different opinions on how you should rig your outfit. Our guides wants us to throw a Skagit with 10 - 15 feet of T-14 or heavier with a big tube fly, 5 feet of 20 lb. Maxima and a #2 double hook (BIG hook). Most anglers are fishing a 9 weight spey rod, I am fishing a 7 and 8.

They have no less than half a dozen 4 seater Polaris Atvs in camp and shuttle guys down to the dock, I made the 5 minute walk twice a day, especially after being in a boat all day. They are running 1860 Lowe Rough Necks with 60 hp Mercury or Yamaha jets and carpeted floors.

Education Day on the Ponoï River with Juan Medina! Wow, I have never in all my life fished like we did today. Throwing 10 – 15 feet of T-14 you quarter a cast down an purposely let a belly form in the line, put the rod under you armpit and then continually retrieve line, five inches at a time. When the fish eats, you just hold the line tight for 2 - 5 seconds and then eventually swing the rod to the side and slowly up, no set, these fish set themselves if you let them, which is the secret. I missed the first 4 fish before I got one pinned. It's strange, but it works and these fish want a fly fished fast! The guide anchors the boat in a likely run and then lets out anchor rope in length up to a 100 plus meters. One angler fished from the stern with a double Spey or snake roll and the other angler from the bow with a snap tee or single Spey. After each cast the guide lets 2 - 4 feet of anchor rope out to walk the boat and anglers down the run. It works, I landed 15 fish from 4 - 13 pounds and my partner Toño from Spain landed 11 - 26 fish total for the day.



My first Atlantic salmon on the Ponoï shared with Toño from Spain

We fished until 1:00 pm and then had a nice lunch of homemade bread, ham, cheeses tomatoes, cucumber, soup, coffee, etc. Then back out to finish the afternoon. The morning produced more fish than the afternoon, but the biggest fish were landed in the afternoon. We caught have a dozen sea-trout and a few grayling. The salmon are "*Osenka Salmon*" (winter run) they are bright from the sea with glitter scales and very fat and strong. They will winter over, under the ice, spend all the next spring and summer in the river and spawn in the fall of 2018 - pretty amazing... The fish are in great shape, they have to be in order to survive a year in the river. It was a very nice day, super fishing partner, great guide and teacher, very mellow and fun, lots of laughs and high fives - perfect first day and initiation. This is, without a doubt the nicest and best staffed lodge I have ever been to. They have 5 mechanics on hand, all the wait staff, head guide, manager, masseuse, and physician are super service oriented. Amazing organization with two gyms for staff; 40 staff altogether.

151 salmon were landed today, top boat was us. Nice dinner, Shushi for appetizers and for dinner we started with a meatball soup, followed with a salad with chicken, with the main course halibut and scallops. Dessert was chocolate mousse with white chocoholic shavings and nice Argentina Malbec. A biologist from Murmansk gave a nice presentation on the river and fish, about 35,000 fish come up the river each year and the run is on a seven year cycle. Tomorrow we fish with Augustine from Argentina.



The Lodge and Dining Room at Ryabaga

## **02 OCT 17 – Monday:**

Today we are fishing with Augustine Logreco, another Argentine guide, up river of the lodge. A slower day today, the weather changed some with an upriver wind, cooler, with periods of rain. Water temperature was about 44°. Toño landed 8 and me 5, I lost 4 fish at the boat. Fishing was



okay though and the company was good. Dan landed three big fish 17, 18 and 19 pounds for the day, hooray for Dan, all on a single handed 8-weight throwing a 300 grain 24 sink-tip.

### **03 OCT 17 – Tuesday:**

We are fishing with Luciano Saldice “Lucho” an Argentine, former guide from Tsimane that I fished with in 2014. We are fishing down river on a beat called Tomba It’s a small world, this fly fishing business... We landed 21 fish today; Toño landed 12 and me 9. The biggest of the day was a nice 6 kilo fish, 13 lbs. The fish today were hot as a pistol, and still fresh fish were running up stream. One fish I landed was about 9 pounds, white-bright, with sea lice and hotter than a pistol. The run to Tomba takes about 30 minutes or better, and in most cases they use the hovercraft, but it was not working this morning. We saw a large military hovercraft going up the river today, probably to Kanveka, a village upstream of the Ponoï Camp. We had reindeer tenderloin as our main dish, excellent...

**Fun Facts:** We are 200 kilometers above the Arctic Circle and 2,652 kilometers and change from the North Pole. A grilse by definition is an Atlantic that spends one year at sea and returns to a river.



Dock with hovercraft in background

**What is an Osenka?** An Osenka is an Atlantic salmon that comes into the river in the fall, winters under the ice, spends all summer in the river and then spawns in the fall. They are the strongest and most robust of all the Atlantics.

### **04 OCT 17 - Wednesday:**

We have Clough Creek Beat today with Scottish Guide Hemish Prestige. It’s cold, in the low thirties, with a stiff upriver wind, which makes Spey casting interesting to say the least. Water temperature this morning is about 42°. The fishing is okay, I lose a big fish, over 15 pounds on a



boat rodeo on shore trying get the fish to net, no big deal. Toño catches several nice fish, as I do; I think we ended the day with 15 fish to net. One fish I hook and land is hotter than a pistol, takes me close to the packing a bright sea lice fish of 6 kilos, super fun. The seven weight Spey rods are fine to cast and deliver the fly, but not great for fighting fish in the heavy current, from an anchored boat, just not enough butt strength to whoop the fish and get them in a timely manner. Hemish is a fine guide, nice young man, recently graduated from St. Andrews University in Scotland, majoring in Greek and Latin. He worked one summer at Rainbow King Lodge in AK, we share some stories of fishing in the area.

**Toño by the way is a talented artist, water colors and oil, amazing work. His images are also world-class. Check out Toño's website at: <http://puicercus.es/>**

We have lunch at a lunch tent, with the Russians, two couples and Juri a single Russian angler. They usually come twice a year to fish the Ponoï. Katchia, wife of Sasha is making meat pies in a cast iron skillet on a wood stove, while one of the Russian guides is making fish soup with heads and tails boiling in a pot over an open fire. It tastes okay. The guides make sea-trout Carpaccio, tasty. Plenty of vodka, wine and rum are being drunk at lunch by the Russians, we are able to slip out in 45 minutes and back to fishing without causing an international incident.



Fish Head Stew boiling in the pot

### 05 OCT 17 - Thursday:

We are going to fish Gold Beach again today, repeat of beats, with Matthew Solon from Ireland. He has been guiding on the Ponoï for 7 years, a very fishy guy, super nice and fun. Matthew guided for years at Kau Tapan on the Rio Grande. And he is going to guide in the Seychelles at Alphonse Island, first time guiding in the saltwater.

**Matthew Facts:** A Bobby is a small grillse, roly poly the hand over hand retrieve, big fish water – hunting tigers.

We came back to the lodge for lunch, since we were so close, nice to get out the weather for a little bit. Fishing was tough, lots of sea-trout caught, nothing big. I think I landed 7 fish for the day, one dark fish. The last place we fished was big fish water and we were using Matthew's rods with very heavy sink tips. The idea was to cast across 90 degrees, feed a bunch of running line to get the fly down, and then once the line was tight, roly poly the line in. Three casts in I get a savage grab and game on, the fish takes a 50 yard run, with violent head shakes. Matthew releases the anchor on a float and we start to follow the fish down and the down – the dirty fight is on. After several close ups we finally get a look at the fish, he is dandy, chrome bright. Several netting attempts later he is in the boat. We slowly motor to shore with fish in the net for picture ops, and a weighing, he would tip the scales at 18 pounds a magnificent animal, feel so blessed to be holding such a creature...great way to the end the fifth day of fishing the Ponoï River at Rybaga Camp. We see a Peregrin Falcon twice today, screeching to beat hell as he flies the river bank, very cool... We might have to depart tomorrow after fishing as the weather is supposed to dump and a low ceiling with forecasted fog. We will see...



Matthew and I with my big fish for the week an 18 pound Osenka



Dinner tonight was amazing, as all the food this week, starting with French Onion Soup followed by a salad with fried mozzarella and duck with orange sauce cooked rare. Dessert was chocolate volcano with ice cream. Delicious.... Checked out the museum, the history of the Ponoï, very cool and interesting, and extremely well done with professional graphics and interpretive displays. <http://www.ponoiriver.com/museum>

### **06 OCT 17 – Friday:**

Fishing day six, our last day, where did the week go? We are with Nick, a Russian guide upstream at a beat called Kolvieh. Nick is from Murmansk and has been guiding on the Ponoï for 12 years. The 1 landed 670 fish for the week. Fishing was tough today, hard bite, rain and wind but we persevered none the less. Katchia a Russian women, wife of Sasha, who owns the second largest steel mill in Russia and who comes and fishes the Ponoï twice a year, super nice guy, landed the biggest fish of the week, a 21 pounder bright buck, gorgeous fish. Tomorrow the helicopter is scheduled to depart at 7:00am, we will see, been foggy in the morning with a low ceiling - early morning anyway...

The camp leases an MI8 Helicopter for the season that stays at the camp. Ilya Sherbovich is the owner of the Ponoï River Company. He is wholly engaged in the protection of wild salmon, the promotion of catch-and-release, and a range of associated protection/conservation initiatives. Ilya serves on the Board of both the Russian Salmon Association and The Wild Salmon Center. He leases the Ponoï, all Russian rivers are owned by the State. The camp/lodge is the best run and managed I have ever experienced - hands down!!! An amazing operation that is so well financed and a non for profit business, a love of the owner... It shows in every aspect! The crew partied it up pretty good last night, well into the morning – the end of another season.



Ryabaga Camp on the Ponoï River



Landing Pad at Ryabaga Camp

### 07 OCT 17 - Saturday:

We are up at 5:30 am; the helicopter is to depart at 7:00 am, weather depending... They have a light breakfast for us, final packing then up the Stairway to Heaven to the helicopter pad. We depart at 7:15 am for the two hour flight to Murmansk. The ceiling is low with fog and we fly above the soup all the way, only coming down at the Murmansk Airport. We retrieve our luggage and met by the Stevie and the Ponoï River Team, they have arranged a van for us to go into Murmansk for lunch. The city center is a good 40 minute drive from the airport. We have time before the restaurant opens, so we go to a fishing shop, that stocks fly fishing gear, Simms, Patagonia, Korkers, Rio, etc, huge store, 10,000 + square feet everything is locked up behind glass doors displayed on slat board? No touchy...interesting merchandising... From there we walk to the restaurant, about four blocks away or a bit more. It is the 101 first anniversary of Murmansk, and all kinds of people and families are out in the city, 10K run is finishing, vendors selling balloons, food, singing, military displays for kids to climb on, Karaoke it's festive and nice to see

Nice lunch, then load up in the vans and head back to the airport to wait 4 hours for our flight to Moscow.

We land in Moscow, retrieve our gear and with luggage carts make our way to the Radisson Blue Hotel (connected to the airport) for the night. Check in is easy, it's late and we have to be up early (4:00 am) to catch our morning which departs at 8:45 am. We fly to Paris, Charles Degaulle International Airport and have a 4 hour layover, departing for SFO @ 3:35 pm – a ten plus hour flight. We arrive SFO at approximately 6:00 pm. We are out of the airport and on the curb waiting for the shuttle van to the El Rancho at 6:45 pm. The traffic out of the City over the Bay Bridge is



horrible as is the traffic at the Benicia–Martinez Bridge. Ev and I trade driving duties; get home about 12:30 pm.

### **Conclusions:**

This is the best run camp I have ever fished at hands down. The staff is huge and very well trained and Joaquin Arocena does a marvelous job orchestrating the staff and daily operations of the camp. There are spares upon spares for every piece of machinery, boats, motors, atvs, you name it. The camp is large, they can accommodate up to 20 anglers at one time, but it does not, in any way feel un-personable, the opposite, it's a community and the entire staff could not be more engaging and helpful, always smiling, asking if you needed anything and if everything was to your liking.

This is a perfect destination for older anglers that cannot stand heavy wading, to fish and catch Atlantics. Fish run between 4 and 20 pounds with the average right around 8 pounds; at least our week. Anglers can expect to land 4 – 8 fish per day, with higher numbers certainly possible. The fishing is relatively easy, straightforward and you do not need to make long casts. The lodging is super comfortable, single private rooms for each guest with full bathroom, heat in bedroom and bathroom including individual on-demand water heaters in each bathroom. They had lunch tents placed up and down the river where you could get out of the weather if need be, complete with wood stove, plenty of wood and kindling, tables, chairs, etc.

The main lodge and dining tent (yes they kept the giant wall tent) is very nice, with a built in wooden bar and tackle shop. There are two wood stoves that at stoked to provide heat. Everyone, including the guides and staff eat with the guests, on two long tables. The food is very good, lots of food, very well prepared and nicely presented. The appetizer spread they put out each evening in front of the fireplace, next to the bar was excellent and varied, they even made sushi one night – lots of it.

Just as the lodge staff, the ground staff in Helsinki and Murmansk was dialed in, helpful, engaging and could not do enough for you. As you probably already knew, this is a world-class fishing destination with a stellar reputation and as far as I am concerned, they earned it



Juan and I during our lunch break

## **Why set the hook on the Ponoι River Company – Ryabaga Camp**

The Ponoι River boasts one of the strongest and most consistent runs of Atlantic salmon in the world. What you might give up in size of fish, you make up in numbers of fish, and you will catch salmon. If you always dreamed of fishing Atlantic Salmon and wanted the best chance at hooking and landing fish, this is the place.

The fishing on the Ponoι River is not difficult. This is straight forward fishing that does not require long casts, big rods and heavy sinking lines. Much of the fishing is done from anchored boats that are marched down the run. If you are not a strong wader, this is the perfect fishery to consider.

All anglers at Ryabaga Camp are lodged in newly constructed wood cabins, single private rooms, with a full bathroom. There is no need to share a room with a stranger, you have your own.

The guide staff on the Ponoι is world-class and all of them are very experienced and excellent teachers. Since the guide is in the boat with each two guests the personable attention is constant. If you are new to Atlantic salmon fishing or casting with a double handed rod, this is a great destination to learn from experts and get up to speed in a hurry.

Ryabaga Camp on the Ponoι River is a deluxe fly fishing property, extremely well financed and staffed. The food service is what you might find in a fine restaurant. Nothing is left to chance and there are spares for everything – no down time due to potential mechanical issues. If you are looking for a high-end fishing destination, with every available amenity, including reliable internet service, in an extremely remote location, this is the destination to consider.



A Great Trip!