



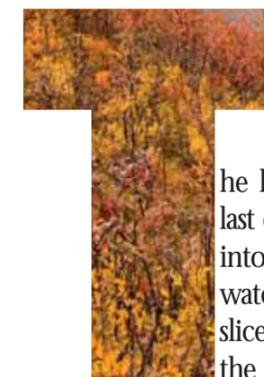
FISHING ADVENTURES



Spectacular scenery: Mongolia's Eg River in autumn

THE LAST MOMENT OF SILENCE

Matt Harris's recent trip into deepest Mongolia in pursuit of the world's largest salmonid left him with memories that will last a lifetime...

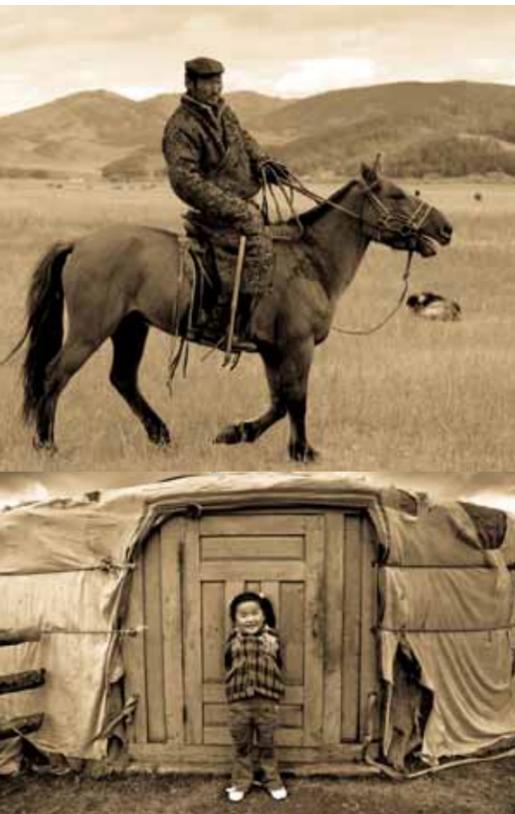


The last hour of the last day. I edged out into the run and watching the line slice out towards the deep, emerald-green slot gleaming under the low cliff, I settled into the meditative rhythm of cast and step.

Upstream, at the head of the pool, the water had rushed around me, gurgling its relentless river-song as it flowed ever onwards. But here in the long mirror-bright tail, I could hear nothing. No wind, no water, no birdsong. Nothing.

Enveloped in the silence, I reflected on the million impossible moments that had somehow managed to cram themselves into one short week: the deranged, exotic chaos of Ulaanbaatar's fast-growing snarled-up sprawl; the long, long helicopter ride across the endless rolling steppe, and that first glimpse of the stunning, crystalline waters of the Eg River.

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Rich Hohne and his guide with Rich's 52 inch taimen



I thought of the sharp, frosty mornings, and the delicious warmth of the wood burning stove in the *ger* (a traditional, felt-lined tent). I remembered thawing out frozen boots and climbing the hill with my camera to capture the first light of the dawn as it played across the wide golden plains beyond the river. I thought of all those sun-drenched afternoons, the star-spangled nights and the magical snow showers.

More memories came flooding back: the wild horses foraging in the high mountain passes, and the huge eagle that had turned on a sixpence and plummeted out of the crisp morning sky to attack the flush of terrified ducks. The howling of the wolves at night, unnervingly close, and the valiant response of the camp dogs. I couldn't help but smile at thoughts of the beaming children in the remote settlements beyond the mountains - precious, every one - their hair sprinkled with snow and their flat, weathered profiles sparkling with laughter. Back too came the bewitching

song of my guide Odhu as he drove me across the vast plains, and the irresistible smile of the proud horseman who had invited me into his *ger* to show off his horse racing medals. I recalled his wife's warm laughter as I winced at the taste of the fermented mare's milk vodka and choked on the fiendishly strong Mongol cigarettes, while the wind whistled across the wide, wild steppe that stretched for a million miles in every direction.

Perhaps most of all, I remembered the fish.

Hucho Taimen once thrived in the remote rivers of the southern Siberian steppe, but they have been tragically and ruthlessly culled by a million, wretched, vodka-swilling Russians. However, in the untouched northern corners of Mongolia, where they are rightly revered as magical creatures, taimen still exist in numbers. To catch one with a fly rod is to touch a hallowed fish from the half-forgotten times before the great Khan; giant creatures from long, long ago, before we messed it all up, with occasional behemoths rumoured to top 100 pounds. Taimen may appear rather long and lean in photographs, but believe me, a taimen in the flesh is astonishingly beautiful. A big one is a true marvel: scarlet fins and a great flame-coloured shovel of a tail give way to broad, spotted flanks and the dark, glossy head of some freakishly malevolent giant brown trout. The gill-plates are painted with exquisitely subtle violets and blues, and inside those cavernous jaws are ranks of vicious teeth that spell only death for any unfortunate creature that stumbles into the taimen's lair. Utterly magnificent.

People will tell you taimen don't fight - ignore them. Sure, a red-hot steelhead or a plump Atlantic salmon will tear off down the river in a way that even the largest taimen can't emulate, but tell me about the take. Do salmon and steelhead blow up on the surface like a grand piano landing in the river? No. So are you going to stop fishing for salmon or steelhead? Apart from the occasional jump, taimen are indeed dogged rather than spectacular fighters but the

big ones are titanicly strong and the take is right up there as one of the most astonishing moments in fly fishing.

Typically, flies are designed to imitate small rodents, but I couldn't help feel that for every squirrel that a taimen wolfs down, there must be a hundred luckless grayling and lenok trout that pass through those same cruel jaws. My hunch was rewarded when my hastily constructed crease fly produced a psychotic strike after just a few minutes fishing.

I'd stuck with the same fly all week, and it had persuaded more than my fair share of these great, gleaming killers to come racing up through the icy waters. Wild slashing takes that rewarded the long hours throwing great looping casts across the wide silvery pools. Head guide Matt Ramsay had shown me a trick to translate virtually every strike into a hooked fish. Taimen will often initially aim to incapacitate or kill their prey with a lightning-fast surface strike, before returning to eat the hapless creature once they consider it stunned or dead. Matt advised me to employ a long loop of line, much like a salmon fisher. Once a fly has come under initial attack, I was counselled to simply drop the loop, creating slack and thus changing the presentation, emulating the dead drift of a stunned or dead creature rather than the skate of a live one struggling across the current.

The trick worked like a charm, with Matt's technique converting almost every strike into a solid hook-up. I marvelled at each fish I caught - lithe, mean, killing machines, every one - but still I coveted the big one, a fish to match the fabulous 52 inch giant my buddy Rich Hohne from Montana had dragged out on that first afternoon.

The 'last-chance saloon' I was fishing has long been notorious as the lair of a genuine leviathan. More than once, the mighty fish had dragged a handsome lenok off of the line, but according to Matt, in the sixteen years that westerners have been fishing the Eg River, no one has so far



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managed to actually hook this elusive creature. I'd fished the run hard, but now, three quarters of the way down the pool, my hopes were fading. I found myself drifting back into the enchanted stillness of that perfect, unbroken silence, once again conjuring memories from the long, magical week that was almost at an end.

And then, in one impossible second, that last long moment of silence was over.

From nowhere, a vast, crashing, blizzard of razor teeth and scarlet fins came rocketing up through the emerald depths to shatter the glassy surface into a colossal explosion of elemental savagery and rage. Singularly the most astonishing moment I've experienced with a freshwater fly rod in my hand.

It took me a second to register that the enormous fish had missed my fly, and somehow, still utterly shell-shocked, I managed to drop the loop of slack line into the cast to let the fly dead-drift downstream. The trick had worked every time, but this grotesque and fabulously large brute was having none of it, and, as the ripples subsided, I was left shaken and fishless.

Matt had heard the commotion and strode up from below. He laughed at my babbling account and calmly suggested I swap the fly for something smaller. Nothing.

Having been through the box, I went back to the crease fly. I was, in truth, already resigned to leaving without putting a hook in this mighty creature, but then, as the fly skated over that same spot, up came the taimen again – another impossible, demented, blood curdling strike that left me shaking. Again, the dropped loop failed to convince the fish, and again I was left fishless

and cursing.

Then I remembered it. The absurd squirrel imitation that really WAS as big as the real thing, laughingly fashioned one bourbon-fueled night on a huge, long shank 5/0 hook. Now was the time: I fished it out and somehow – with an ugly, overhead cast – managed to get it airborne and sent it looping out across the river.

As the fly started back across the pool, I held my breath: the huge foam lip kicked up a boiling, gurgling, foam-flecked wake that must surely bring the giant fish rushing back one last time.

The huge fly sputtered over the taking spot without so much as a stir, but as it came onto the dangle and I muttered yet another curse, there was one last, final, impossible combustion – a giant, world-ending eruption that shook me to my boots. This time, the fish had abandoned its diffidence and had crushed the fly in an unceremonious demolition. I struck hard and the massive creature felt the steel and reared its fearful great head in a terrific, thrashing rage. I blurted out an incoherent expletive and heard Matt and Rich echo my amazement, as the fish lashed its huge, flaming tail and rushed down into the depths of the pool, the reel fizzing frantically as I did my best to keep tight to this vast prehistoric beast.

Don't fight? Really? This fish was doing its best to drag me into the river. The monstrous taimen swam powerfully around the pool, seemingly oblivious to the heavy side-strain and the powerful drag, as it sought out its lair. Finally, the giant fish skulked behind a large rock at the bottom of the pool, and all my ugly grunting and groaning was for nothing. I simply couldn't budge it.

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A long impasse followed, but slowly, with Matt at my shoulder, I worked my way below the fish. Now the fish was obliged to fight the current, as well as the deep bend in the ten-weight rod. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the fish was starting to relent and finally, I managed to prise it from its hiding place. It rushed violently around the pool, frantic now, but deprived of its sanctuary, the leviathan was clearly starting to tire. Suddenly, it was up on the shallow flat, right there in the gin-clear water – a gargantuan beast that simply defied belief. Matt crept forward, his enormous, outsized landing net surely too small to engulf this extraordinary creature. I drew the fish slowly

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towards us and then, just a metre or so from the outstretched net, the fish rolled over and writhed in a violent, last-gasp effort to be free. The huge barbless hook skewed around and in a hideous, gut-wrenching moment, popped free. The fish rolled back upright and for a moment, Matt and I were both looking at its vast, motionless form suspended in the icy waters. Then, with a kick of its great tail, it was gone.

There was nothing to say. Matt came over and clapped me on the shoulder and then we trudged wearily back to the boat where Rich fished out three beers out and we sat for a few moments in silence. Finally, Rich punched my

arm and broke the spell: "Looked nearly as big as mine", he grinned. I punched him right back and we clinked bottles, drained our beer and, like you do, fell into reliving every last moment of both epic battles.

As we squeezed back into the old Soviet Mi8 and the big helicopter whirred into life and started to drag us back to Ulaanbaatar, I took one last look down at the magical valley of the Eg River and once more drifted into the million memories I'd been afforded by just one week in this astonishing country. Each and every moment had been special. I thought of the sparkling characters, the wild, unfettered creatures of the steppe and the fabulous, pristine landscapes, splashed in autumnal golds and stretching out forever across the unending plains. I thought of Rich's magnificent fish, and of the vast serpentine creature that erupted from the depths and broke my heart with its last writhing lunge at the net. Most of all, I thought of that astonishing moment when the huge taimen had first crashed into my consciousness.

That moment, and the moment just before; that last, magical moment of silence.