



From Top:
Arriving at Tree River by float plane.
The author with his first fly caught arctic char.
An arctic char takes to the air on fly.
Main pic: The stunning wilderness setting of
Tree River Lodge.



northern exposure

In the harsh and unforgiving land of ice road truckers, Col Roberts embarks upon a quest in search of the world's biggest arctic char and lake trout.





northern reaches of Canada as being the best location to target big sea-run fish. They are the only freshwater fish located this far north. Indeed, the current world record of 32lb was set at Tree River. The only problem was, getting there is no walk in the park.

Plummer's Arctic Lodges operate a rustic fly-in lodge at Tree River as part of their much larger main lodge located at Great Bear Lake, 232 miles to the southwest. They



Top: The flight to Tree River is spectacular with a horizon of seemingly endless lakes, rivers, remnant snow packs and best of all, no sign of human degradation. Middle: The stunning spawning colours of the arctic char. Bottom: Aerial view of our home away from home at Tree River.

IMAGINE A PLACE as vast as 1.14 million square kilometres, and with a population of only 40,000 people (with most living in Yellowknife, the only city). Imagine an area well beyond ice road trucker territory and containing pristine mountain forests, vast expanses of tundra punctuated by a seemingly endless number of wild rivers and lakes. This place is known as Canada's Northwest Territories and contains some of the most inhospitable, yet starkly beautiful country on earth. Best of all it has superb fishing.

When I first clasped my eyes on an image of a spawning arctic char I was simply knocked out by its stunning vermilion colours. Therein began a research quest to locate where they could be found in good size and numbers. Char are both a fresh and

saltwater fish and closely related to both the salmon and trout. Whilst they are located throughout much of the northern hemisphere, my enquiries led me to the Tree River in the far

offer either one or two night stays at Tree River (pursuing char) as part of a week-long package to Great Bear Lake Lodge targeting species such as lake trout, pike and grayling. In other words, you cannot simply fly in to Tree River and stay for an entire week targeting arctic char. Given that Great Bear is the largest lake in Canada (at over 160 miles in length), and contains the biggest lake trout on record, it's a great combination to fish both systems, providing the weather is on the angler's side! This is remote territory and subject to the vagaries of the weather and wild animals. If bad weather blasts in from the arctic the single engine Otter floatplane is



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The chartreuse coloured Pixie spoon was highly effective on char.

unable to depart Great Bear Lake or alternatively guests that have already made it to Tree River may become stranded until the outlook improves. There is only a small fishing window each year coinciding with the height of summer. For the remaining 10 months of the year the lodge sits idle, and grizzly bears are known to break into the main dining area and devour cans of food, in addition to eating the fish wall mounts!

The Plummer family have been fishing Great Bear and nearby Great Slave Lakes since 1938. They first began taking clients to Great Bear Lake around 1959 and Tree River in 1960. Despite the isolated nature

of the region (located 400 miles northeast of Yellowknife, the capital of the Northwest Territories,) I was surprised to find a private graded airstrip, 5,600' in length, and capable of landing jet aircraft.

Upon arriving at Great Bear Lake Lodge I was greeted by my guide for the week, who introduced himself as "Big Fish Terry". The inevitable questions that followed on how he was bestowed the moniker "Big Fish" gave him the green light to tell me how many large lake trout he had produced for clients. He was certainly cocky - perhaps too much so - although of pleasant disposition.

After settling into a rustic yet

comfortable cabin, followed by a briefing in the main dining area and the purchase of a fishing license, we headed out on the water mid afternoon for a shakedown fish at the nearby Narakay Islands. Even though my visit coincided with the last week in July, it had been a late season resulting in much of the lake being still clogged with ice in the preceding week. Amazingly for this time of year (the height of summer), pack ice had only cleared a few days before my arrival. Remnant ice packs could be readily seen from the air flying in, and we came across several whilst travelling in the dinghy to various fishing locations. So thick had the ice

been in the week prior to my arrival, the lodge was forced (at great expense) to fly clients out to various locations around the massive lake where they had boats and fuel based. Normally these fly-out locations are available at an extra cost ranging in price from around \$450 - \$675.USD per person, depending upon the distance from the main lodge.

On the way to the Narakay Islands 'Big Fish Terry' told me of the resident peregrine falcons. Sure enough, upon arrival he located one guarding its nest on a cliff face, allowing for some great photo opportunities.

With our attention now tuned to locating lake trout 'Big Fish' filled me in on the lake trout's preferences. Although they like cold water when there is ice about it can be too cold for them in many sections of the lake. At this time they prefer the warmer water located over sandy bottoms in shallow parts of various bays. Later in the season when the water warms, the lake trout move to deeper sections of the lake. It was incredibly clear and ranged in depth from 3-20'. Many took off to deeper water as our boat approached requiring quite a bit of drop back with the spoon lures and a weaving trolling run in an attempt not to spook them. It was a nice little introductory session with a handful caught to around 5kg.

That evening at the lodge we were told the weather outlook was favourable and we should pack in readiness for an early departure to Tree River. This was great news as my prime reason in travelling to this region was to catch a sea run

Top: Checking out a set of rapids from an elevated position.
Middle: A big char powers away once it has seen the dinghy.
Bottom: This char is fresh in from the sea and hasn't acquired its spawning colours yet.





Crouching down to cast into a small back eddy loaded with arctic char, as they lay up to rest on their way upstream to spawn.

char. It took 1.5 hours in the single engine Otter float plane to reach our destination and the flight alone was worth every penny of the charter price. On what was a beautiful clear day we looked down from our mobile vantage point and watched thousands of rivers and lakes pass underneath with not one hint of human activity or

alongside us as the floatplane taxied into the makeshift river landing and refuelling post a few hundred metres downstream of the lodge. Such is the isolated nature of the location, it costs around \$1,000.USD per 200 litre drum to deliver fuel here!

Char are an interesting fish. I have caught freshwater char (dolly

months, transform in colouration to a magnificent vermillion with white dots (August is the best month to observe this when spawning takes place.) Once hooked they readily jump and the fight is only enhanced exponentially if they make it into the fast flowing rapids.

Tree River Lodge is very basic, with plywood walls and canvas roofed

taken in a separate communal block. Ablutions are taken in old fashioned thunderboxes with long drops which dot the hillside, almost in comical fashion. Without doubt, the best feature of the rustic camp is the dining room with uninterrupted views across a stunning set of rapids.

I had been told the char could

hill above the camp, and pulled up a mere hundred or so metres down the other side where a small feeder creek and set of rapids flowed into a backwater. Surely such a benign looking stretch of water, a mere hop, skip and jump from the camp couldn't produce, or so I thought?

Using a 1/0-6 pink and white

10lb before they wised up and went off the chew. What a start! The small creek went on to produce a few more fish, but nothing like that first session.

Anglers bouncing white bucktail jigs and pixie spoons (with either pink, chartreuse, or orange inserts), across and downstream of the main current flow did quite well. A couple of other



The stunning vermillion colours of a spawning arctic char.

spoils of degradation. Tree River itself is spectacular with pastel grey cliffs, waterfalls and a series of aqua blue rapids. As we descended, large herds of musk oxen broke into a trot across the tundra (no trees grow this far north,) while a buck caribou munched on the luxuriant undergrowth

warden in Alaska) and they don't have much of a reputation for their fight. However, we were fishing for sea run arctic char fresh in from the sea and in peak condition ready to traverse the rapids in order to spawn. Early in the season they are silver with small pink dots and over a period of a couple of

structures; yet comfortable for such a harsh and remote environment. When initially constructed in the 60s, plywood sheets had to be cut into 8 X 2' panels in order to fit into amphibian Grumman Goose planes. Each cabin sleeps 4 people, has 24 hour electricity and oil heaters, while showers are

be very challenging on fly gear (as opposed to spinners,) but 'Big Fish Terry' reckoned he had a secret little creek that would produce, provided we were first there. "Lead the way" I responded. In readiness for a long hike, I was somewhat surprised when we tramped our way past thunderbox

popsicle fly I hooked a char on the second cast. It came from near my feet at the tail of the rapids and jumped a number of times before being coaxed into the bank and released. In a fast and furious session we (I had invited Terry to fish as I needed to capture pics,) hooked 7 and landed 4 up to

dedicated flyfishermen working the main river worked hard for only a single char. With the water dropping 6" per day flyline selection became very important. In many areas sink tip lines were snagging at an annoying rate, with the solution coming by switching to floating lines and weighted flies.



Above: Early morning line up of dinghies and float planes at Great Bear Lake Lodge.
Below: A nice lake trout taken on a giant pink flatfish.

Our second day involved walking upstream to Presidential Pool. In various backwaters we found plenty of char resting up before continuing their migration run upstream, but try as we might we couldn't entice a single sniff on fly. Switching to the 'darkside' we scored a few nice hookups on spoons. If they didn't make it into the fast water they were normally landed but the opposite was the case if they hit the maelstrom and tore off downstream. At Slippery Jacks Pool I watched on with mild amusement as 'Big Fish Terry' hooked a number of nice fish only to have the hooks pull on every occasion as he did his best to turn the rampaging fish before they hit the main current flow.

There is one thing that all Canadians want to do; swim in the Arctic Ocean. I guess it's a bit like an Aussie wanting to climb Ayers Rock. I was told that if you are loco enough to take the plunge then you receive a T-Shirt stating "I was stupid enough to swim in the Arctic Circle". How could I resist the dare?

Later that afternoon I joined Irene the barmaid and Sandy the cook, on a quest to swim the freezing cold ocean. It was hard to get out of my head the mental picture of floating ice packs I had observed in the various waterways on the flight in. My comments to the assembled audience that I never swam back home unless the ambient air temperature was 40C



fell on deaf ears. There was no turning back as I found myself stuck in a dinghy as we bashed our way out of the river mouth, across a large bay and to a far-flung promontory where we clambered up some rocks and ultimately came upon a low ledge. This was it. While 'Big Fish Terry' stood bear watch with a loaded shotgun we

all plunged into the freezing drink. Surprisingly it wasn't too bad in, although the freezing cold set in as soon as we climbed out. Was it worth it? You bet, and I am now the proud owner of a rather unique T-Shirt!

That evening Terry and I went out at 9pm to 'yo yo' some spoons in Trophy Pool, a hop, skip and a jump above the camp (remember the sun only sets for a couple of hours in summer this far north). The technique involved casting across the main current flow, engaging the gears of the spinning reel, lifting the rod tip but keeping the lure in touch with the bottom, and finally at the end of the swing slowly 'yo yo' the spoon back. After catching a couple of smaller char, Terry hooked a monster.

It was in superb condition and the reddest coloured fish we had seen for the trip. At around 25lb it was a big fish, even by Tree River standards, and a fitting way to end the day.

We only had 2 hours in the morning available to fish before the plane was due to arrive. Gary, an ex New York cop joined us for a final 'yo yo' session. I hooked a big fish that

looked every bit of 20lb before the hooks eventually pulled. Gary then landed a nice char around 20lb, a silver colour, fresh in from the sea.

All too soon it was time to depart this amazing place. Taking off, the pilot took us on an amazing low level flight home, passing over herds of musk oxen, moose and a grizzly bear with 2 cubs. If you ever get the chance to visit Tree River, take it, as the experience is profound!

Now back at Great Bear Lodge our attention turned to lake trout. It was a little over an hour's run across the open expanses of the lake to reach Bloody River. Small remnant ice packs dotted the horizon and presented a navigation hazard to the unwary. Upon arrival, we were greeted with millpond conditions and a caddis hatch. As far as the eye could see, lake trout - and in particular the redfin sub-species - were slurping caddis from the surface! It was a great sight and put paid to the notion that you have to always fish deep for them.

Large numbers of fish could be observed free swimming in the shallow, clear water. We landed 7 in quick succession in the first half hour trolling spoons. Keen to catch larger fish we swapped to a giant blue/silver coloured flatfish with the front set of hooks crushed down in order to minimise damage to the fish. The flatfish is ideal for gouging the bottom - while rarely snagging - and sure attracted the trout. At times we also enjoyed good success with a big pink coloured flatfish, which looked as though it would be more at home in an adult shop than on the end of a fishing rod. Trolling around 150' behind the boat we caught twenty five fish up to 20lb before taking a shore lunch break. Cooking a small trout kept for this purpose, dusted in cajun spices in a frypan over the open fire in the middle of nowhere, was a nice way to break up the day.



Top: It was a late season with remnant ice packs dotting the main lake.
Middle: 'Big Fish Terry' with a decent lake trout.
Bottom: A welcome way to break up the day is to cook a shore lunch of lake trout dusted in cajun spices.

The guides at Great Bear are there (like many clients) primarily for big lake trout. Why else would they give up their normal day job for only 7 weeks of guiding and then have to pay their own way to Yellowknife! Big Fish Terry had been guiding for 7 seasons and his aim was to catch a lake trout in excess of 60lb, and preferably something in the vicinity of 70 or 80. His biggest for a client thus far is 57lb. His mission remains incomplete and keeps him coming back.

Camp manager - Shane Jonker - suggested we should go fishing in the evening to see if we could tangle with a laker on fly. Jonker is a very talented bloke and an ideal appointment in such a remote area where you must overcome and solve problems without the assistance of tradesmen or outside help. It's not as though 'Hire-A-Hubby' is on tap. His most memorable feat was transporting dinghies overland and by river from Yellowknife. Local Indians had told him that a particular river was deep enough to allow them

to traverse its reaches in order to get to the lodge. It wasn't. Faced with a huge problem in the middle of nowhere he found a derelict truck left over by a mining company years before hand. He poured canola oil into the engine

It's nice having so much daylight that you can fish until almost midnight!

and outboard juice into the fuel tank and incredibly got it going, and then managed to complete the journey with the dinghies (loaded on the tray) to the lake. It was ingenuity and self-reliance at its best! If anyone has seen the documentary series 'Ice Road Truckers' (shown on Foxtel), you gain some idea of the incredible difficulties facing people in the high Arctic.

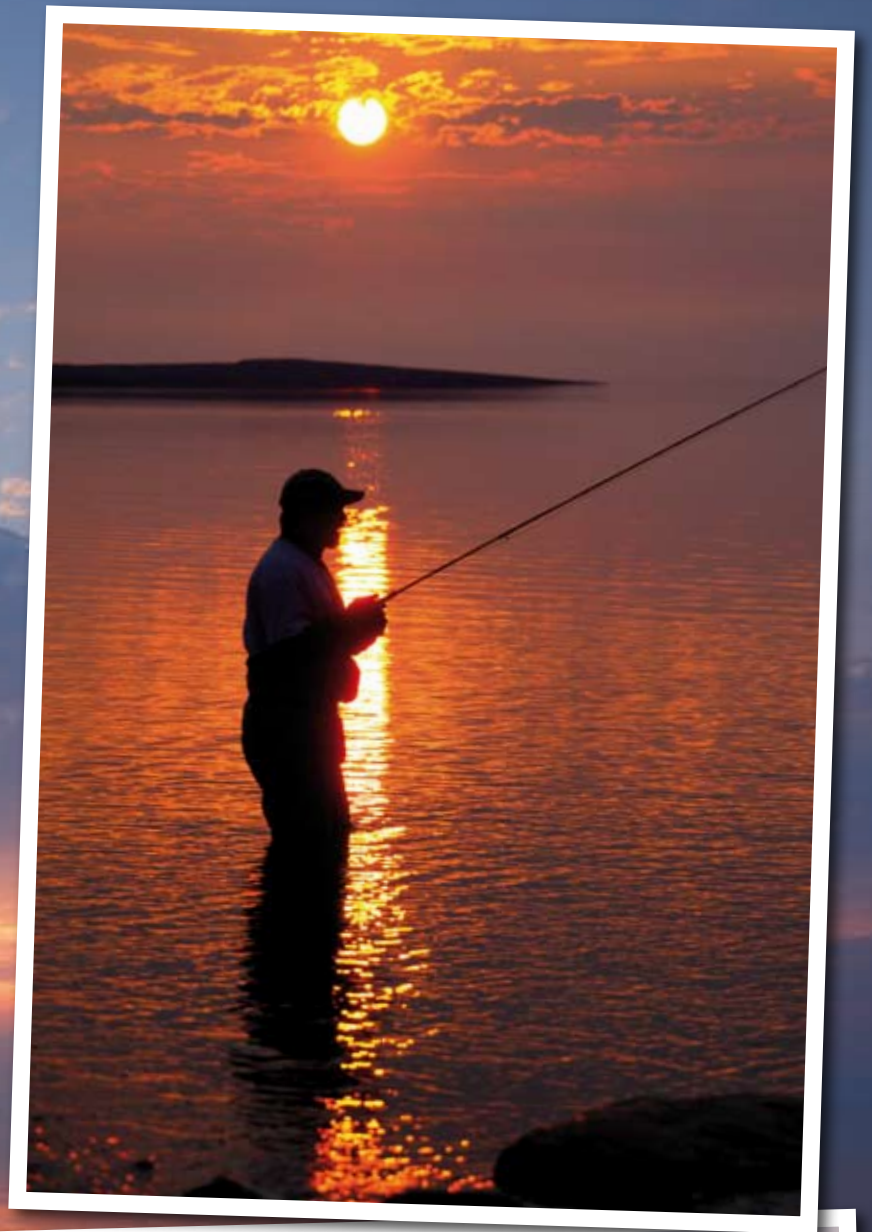
It's nice having so much daylight

that you can fish until almost midnight! We travelled to a small bay where a rivulet entered; ideal territory for grayling and lake trout. Upon opening my rod tube I discovered that my brand new fly rod was broken near the tip. Oh the joys of travel! We nailed a few smallish lakers around 4-6lb on 'Eat Me' Cisco baitfish patterns tied by Eugene Geppert, another guest at the lodge. Earlier in the day Geppert had done well on lakers and pike by first trolling spoons in the shallows to find them and then successfully switched to fly. One conveniently spewed up a baitfish that it had been feeding on. That evening, Geppert tied some flies using the baitfish as his colour guide, and duly gave me one to try out. Close to midnight the sun finally began to set, resulting in some spectacular images.

Our last day involved a fly out to Clearwater Bay about half an hour's flight to the west of the lodge. After a week of glorious weather the clouds rolled in and the wind blew from

offshore resulting in uncomfortable, choppy conditions. As the day wore on the wind increased in intensity to the point that it became dangerous to continue, although we persisted. The conditions suited the lakers as we caught around forty up to 25lb, in addition to losing a big fish under the boat when the hooks pulled. One of the other boats with us caught a 36lb fish. Around 3.30pm they really came on the bite resulting in a hookup as soon as a lure hit the water. We also observed the amazing spectacle of a 10lb laker being eaten - and then spat out - by a monster trout when it observed our boat. It was a great way to end a superb trip to this magnificent part of the world.

Great Bear Lake represents the best place in the world to target big lake trout. Add to the mix the fact that Tree River also represents the best place in the world to catch big arctic char and there are powerful reasons to visit. The flight alone to Tree River is worth the admission fee!



Main Picture: Fly fishing a small rivulet for lake trout close to midnight as the sun is finally about to set!
Top: Stairway to the sun.
Bottom: Close up profile of a lake trout taken on an 'Eat Me' Cisco baitfish fly pattern.

FACT FILE FACT FILE FACT FILE



OPERATOR

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Email: fish@plummerslodges.com
http://canadianarcticfishing.com

HOW TO GET THERE

I flew Air Canada from Sydney to Vancouver and onto Whitehorse (for the first part of my journey as reported in Fishing Wild No 9). From Whitehorse I flew Air North to Calgary and then Air Canada to Yellowknife. After overnighing in Yellowknife I then flew on a twin turbo prop charter direct to Great Bear Lake Lodge.

YELLOWKNIFE

All tours to the lodges must transit through Yellowknife, the capital city of The Northwest Territories. Arriving at the airport at 10pm I was met by a Plummers representative and taken to the Explorer Hotel before flying to Great Bear Lake Lodge the following morning. It is a well appointed hotel and cost \$165.CAD per night not including breakfast. Yellowknife has a number of good restaurants and the Northern Frontier Visitors Centre. Recommended is a tour of the Prospector's Trail and Old Town.

WEATHER AND SEASON

The short season of July and August coincides with the arctic summer. The lodges are closed for the remainder of the year. Although it is summer bad weather can occur at any time.

SPECIES

At Great Bear Lake Lodge the 3 main species are: lake trout, pike and grayling while at Tree River Lodge it is arctic char (although small lake trout can also be caught).

LANGUAGE

English and to a limited degree, French.

VISAS

No visa is required for Australian visitors.

CURRENCY

Canadian dollar (CAD). 1\$.CAD buys \$1.126.AUD at the time of writing. Most places will take U.S dollars and in fact bar bills, fishing equipment and clothing apparel are charged in \$.USD.

ACCOMMODATION and COSTS

Although the lodge buildings are somewhat old and rustic, they are comfortable and well appointed. There is a central combined lounge, dining room and bar area, complete with cosy wood fire that overlooks the lake. Wooden walkways radiate out to 2 bed cabins, complete with ensuite, heating and storage racks to hang waders and jackets. A nice touch is the supply of ice around 5pm each day for those wanting pre-dinner drinks.

The cost of a 7 day trip to Great Bear Lake Lodge is \$4,995.USD plus taxes and \$995.USD plus taxes for an overnight trip to Tree River Lodge (including all flights).

FISHING EQUIPMENT

Although anglers can cast to rocky shorelines for smaller sized lake trout trolling is the norm, using spoons, jigs and swimming plugs such as giant flatfish. A 10-15kg rod matched with either baitcaster or spinning reel and 20-30lb braid line (or monofilament) is a good match. The guides are adamant that you need a stiff rod to set hooks and stay connected to lakers using monofilament. A slightly softer tip (but still with plenty of back bone), is recommended when using braid. Lake trout do have a tendency to shake free from barbless hooks.

Best lures were Wordens 6" flatfish T60 (they can dive up to 25'), Lucky Strike Half Wave spoons (silver with red-white or gold with red-white), Eppinger Huskie Junior and Senior spoons (in silver/blue).

When using lures, a 6'6" to 7' spin rod loaded with either 20lb mono or braid is recommended for arctic char. Recommended lures are Pixie one ounce spoons (red, pink, orange or chartreuse colours), and white 3/4-1oz jigs in bucktail or rubber tails. For flyfishers; an 8 or 9 weight is about ideal, matched with floating lines when using dry flies and a sink tip when using wets. When the water is dropping quickly and snagging an issue, another option is to use a floating line with weighted flies. Best success came from using 1/0 pink and white popside flies. Other flies used at the lodge are 2-6 Mickey Finns, Black-nosed Daces, Woolly Buggers, Zonkers and rabbit-strip leeches.

The grayling are large and average around 1-2lb (the lodge record is 5lb 15oz). They can be taken on both lures and flies using ultra light spinning rods loaded with 4-6lb line. Popular lures are Mepps spinners in sizes #0-#3 in red and gold colours, small 1/16-1/8oz jigs in grub and paddle tails, Eppinger 1/2" Little Devle spoons in dark orange and green and black/orange. For flyfishers; a 4-5 weight rod with floating line is about the right match. Flies include black gnats, Royal Wolfe, elk-hair caddis in sizes 10-14 and muddler minnows in sizes 8-10.

FLY OUTS

Fly-outs to remote and less targeted regions of the lake are a popular option. Here is a sample of some costs; Shipwreck (aka Pig Pen) \$456, McGill \$550, Clearwater \$525, Horton River \$675. There are boats (not as well appointed as those at the main lodge), in situ and outboard motors are carried on the floatplane.

CLOTHING

Although it is summer, cold fronts can be expected at any time, particularly late in the season around August. It pays to

dress in layers and don't forget a good rain and wind jacket as it can get mighty cold when travelling on the lake. It also pays to put on waders and boots with thick warm socks to keep the cold out or when wading to fish. Take eye-shades to aid sleep, given that it is only dark for about 2 hours in any given day in summer.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Photography and wildlife viewing.

STAR RATING (out of five)

Accommodation - lodge category	★★★★
Food	★★★★
Guide	★★★★
Boats	★★★★
Fishing	★★★★
Weather	★★★★
Ease To Get To	★★
Suitability for non fishing partners	★★★
Bugs	★★★
Airlines	
Air Canada	
On Time Performance	★★★★★
Service Performance	★★★★★
Air North	
On Time Performance	★★★★
Service Performance	★★★★



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