

Fast File

Tree River (Kogluktualuk) is a glacial river in the northwestern corner of the Canadian state, Nunavut. It pours into Coronation Gulf, which is a part of the frigid Arctic Ocean to the high north. The lower stretches are fairly chaotic with gushing white water, whirling pools, waterfalls and long riffles.

Ten kilometres from the ocean there is a natural barrier for the arctic char's spawning run, which occurs over the course of the summer – from the middle of June through September. The barrier is a plummeting and several-metre-high waterfall that is impossible for the fish to climb. Downstream, the river gets packed to bursting point with fully-grown arctic char, which become increasingly coloured up as the season progresses.

Tree River Lodge provides access to the upper four kilometres of the lower river stretches. From the lodge itself you hike upstream from one pool to the next, or you fish from a boat or Spey cast in some of the bigger and more slow-flowing pools close to and below the lodge. The fishery is administered by Plummer's Arctic Lodges in cooperation with the local Indian tribe. The season is short and hectic – just like the arctic summer – and it runs from the beginning of July through August. However, because of the midnight sun, you can fish 24 hours a day. Additional information can be found at www.plummerslodges.com/lodges/tree-river.

The chaotic, meandering Tree River, home to huge arctic char.

Tree River: World-Class Arctic Char Fishing

Rasmus Ovesen takes us to a fabled arctic char fishery with a reputation that is seemingly blown completely out of proportion – until you get to experience it for yourself.

I throw my arms jubilantly into the air as Klaus nets the big, broad-shouldered arctic char that I've been vehemently fighting with along the edges of the river's frothing white water. In that same instant, I feel a piercingly sharp pain radiate from my left shoulder, and it is with consternation and panic that I realise that my shoulder has been dislocated. It is unwaveringly locked in a semi-comic (and historically inappropriate) angle, and the pain is so unbearable that I gasp for breath.

Klaus, who still hasn't the faintest idea about what is going on, looks at me with amazement from the water's edge. He sees me toppling bewildered about in circles like a headless chicken, and he hears the screechy noises of torment that my trembling voice produces. He also sees how I desperately try to support my left arm with the right and suddenly he realises what has happened.

Gloomy thoughts storm deafeningly through my

head as I stagger across the distorted boulders along the riverbank. The situation is grave! We're at Tree River, in the middle of nowhere, right on the border of the bitterly cold Arctic Ocean, several hundred kilometres from the nearest hospital and totally cut off from the outside world. Granted, there is a hydroplane coming in tomorrow, but the remainder of our northwestern Canada trip is in imminent danger.

The ill fate of an old friend lingers hauntingly on the edge of my consciousness. He suddenly found himself in need of surgery when his shoulder was dislocated and all the muscle tissue cramped and locked the shoulder unwaveringly in place. It all ended in a painful operation that had serious consequences for his mobility. "Oh my God, why is this happening?"

My thoughts are chaotic, shapeless and incoherent, but in a brief moment of clear-sightedness I manage to place myself over a big boulder so

that my shoulder and arm are supported and all the muscles can relax a little. The relief grants my tormented mind a painless window, where my thoughts are allowed some resonance, and suddenly I find myself carefully coaxing, twisting and lifting my arm and shoulder. Something seems to fall into place and as I get up, my arm comes down alongside my upper body. My shoulder and arm are back in position and, even though the pain hasn't subsided, it has yielded to such a degree that I can walk towards Klaus and pick up where I left off.

A few moments later, I momentarily lift a staggering 8kg arctic char out of the water, while Klaus' blinking camera lens scrutinises its olive-green and turquoise flanks, its innumerable orange dots, the charcoal-grey marbling of the gills and the elegant white tinge of the fins.

A Place Of Special Interest

For the past three days we have stayed at Plummer's Lodge and fished Great Bear



Craig Blackie with a fantastic male char.



It's not just the fishing that makes this area of Canada so special.

“ When the river's record-sized arctic char are mentioned, their eyes glisten and their voices come alive with a sudden, high-frequency eagerness. ”

Lake – a massive freshwater reservoir in the Northwest Territories surrounded by an immensity of fir forests, swamps and barren plains. We have experienced some spectacularly good fly fishing for fierce lake trout in cannibalistic sizes, but throughout the whole ordeal the guides and guests have been talking excessively about another body of water: The Tree River in the Nunavut Territory.

Now, there's obviously nothing controversial about fishermen talking longingly about other destinations than the one they're currently fishing – no matter where that

may be. But Tree River soon comes to sound like a place of special interest. It is talked about with an enthusiasm bordering on religious fanaticism – as if it were a mythological place from a long-gone era.

The guides and guests, who have previously visited Tree River, light up with blissful and devout looks on their faces when it comes up in conversation. They pronounce the name with such respect that you'd think it was sacred – and when the enthrallingly beautiful river's record-sized arctic char are mentioned in passing, their eyes glisten and their voices come alive with

a sudden, high-frequency eagerness.

The turquoise-blue Tree River on the brink of the Arctic Ocean seems to have an almost bewitching effect on the people who travel there – these initiated individuals who nod knowingly to each other when someone talks about swinging streamers in Presidential Pool, rising to the challenges of Second Fall's whirling eddies, and Spey casting in Amsterdam's deep runs. They all seem to lack words to describe exactly what it is about the river that makes it so special, but their accounts are saturated with an incisive yearning and nostalgia.



The wild upper reaches of Tree River are far different from the slower, lazy lower reaches, pictured below left.

Wild And Magic

We obviously have a hard time understanding all the hype, but when we hear that it is possible to charter a small hydroplane and fly out to the river, it obviously doesn't take us long before we're packed and ready to go.

As the hydroplane touches down on Tree River's lightly milk-coloured glacial water, we still have no idea about what awaits us. Here, downstream from the provisional Tree River Lodge, where we'll be sleeping over,

the river isn't something out of the ordinary. It meanders drowsily downstream towards the Arctic Ocean, set down in a harsh and barren terrain, and it might as well have been any random river in Greenland or northern Norway.

It isn't until we have unloaded all our equipment and supplies at the lodge, pieced our fly rods together and hiked upstream, that the river really starts to work its subtle magic on us. Up here, the river has an altogether different character and temperament. Radically different even! It is WILD!

Frothing white water that gushes purposefully downstream prompted by dramatic increases in terrain gradients supersedes the calm waters of the lower river. Here, the river is a roaring and intimidating force of nature. Riffles, eddies and waterfalls are succeeded by maelstrom-like back waters, sheltering boulders and temporary windows of limpid water – all of it dangerously proximate to rushing currents

with metre-high, foaming waves. In its upper reaches, the Tree River is a truly chaotic and unbridled river – an intimidating but fascinatingly beautiful whirlpool of water that rips and tears at our fast-beating hearts as we follow its course further upstream (frequently looking over our shoulders for grumpy grizzlies).

Buffalo Hunting With Slingshots

For the next 24 hours we thrust ourselves upon the river and its massive arctic char, and in the process our naivety and lack of tackle preparation is exposed and severely punished.

We have previously experienced prolonged trips with broken rods, failing equipment and spooled fly reels. However, what happens over the course of a single day at Tree River is almost tragicomic in comparison. In addition to burst leaders, broken links and straightened-out hooks, we lose a shooting head, a full-



Travelling light.



Touchdown. Tree River was accessed via hydroplane.



A selection of flies to tame those big char.



Rasmus Ovesen with a superb female fish.



ASPIRATIONAL

Fly fishing the fast water...



... using a range of char patterns on 8-wts.



The power of the fish is immense as the guides race downstream to net...



... the powerful chrome char.

length fly line and 50 metres of backing. And we break two 8-wt rods in half. Granted, we start off by catching a stringer of insolently beautiful 4kg to 5kg arctic char in Presidential Pool – a slightly insignificant pool that has got its name because George Bush Sr likes to fish there. But as we charter further upstream and face the challenges of Relay Pool, Slippery Jack, Montreal and Second Falls, we suddenly feel as if we're buffalo hunting with slingshots. And we curse ourselves for leaving the 10 and 11-wt rods at the Great Bear Lodge.

Not surprisingly, the combination of a river with torrential currents, steep banks, waterfalls and myriad of partially exposed boulders on the one hand and some explosive, strong-willed and more or less uncontrollable arctic char on the other results in some overdramatic fights. It is quite simply extreme! To even stand the slightest chance, the fish must be fought mercilessly hard. The crux of the matter is to prevent them from reaching the frothing and waterslide-like main current and simply disappearing downstream. If that happens, all is lost. Pursuit is impossible, so all that's left is to block the reel and hope that it is the leaders and not the fly line that frays and breaks. We're only halfway successful in this regard...

Big Artic Char

Under a lightly grizzled sky, lit subtly by the midnight sun's lazy gloom, we experience some fishing that by far exceeds our wildest expectations. We have been fortunate enough to hit one of the season's first considerable runs of arctic char, and after sufficient experimentation with different line densities, flies and techniques we start making contact with one fully-grown char after the other. The majority of them – including a small handful of fish that must have been shockingly close to the magic 20lb mark – we lose, but that's beside the point.

The statistics notwithstanding, we catch more and bigger arctic char than most uninitiated people would immediately be inclined to believe, and every dramatic and nerve-wracking fight leaves its own indelible impression in us.

Along the way, we both lose all sense of time. We're right on the edge of the end of the world, on the bank of an intoxicatingly beautiful river, but we're both painfully aware that we're here on borrowed time. The thought that we have to leave this paradise on earth makes us fish with equally dosed amounts of focus and fright – as if every cast might be the last.

At one point during the night, Klaus breaks his fly rod



“Then my fly rod snaps too – with a loud whiplashing sound! The sudden crack wakes us up – as if from a dream.”

Buffalo hunting with sling shots. With two broken 8-wts, Rasmus wished he'd packed his 10-wts.


on a chrome beauty just shy of 8kg – a fish he miraculously lands despite the accident.

After that, we take turns fighting and landing fish. Then my fly rod snaps too – with a loud whiplashing sound! The sudden crack wakes us up – as if from a dream. The river pours downstream with renewed intensity, the beautiful tundra comes back to life with vivid colours, and all of a sudden we're awkwardly aware of the surroundings and ourselves. We have now broken both the treacherous wands that we have been flinging self-hypnotically over the river all day, and a spell has been broken. The river has set us free, and even though it might have been tempting to hike the roughly five kilometres back to the camp to pick up the backup rods, there seems to be no point in doing so.

Seduced By The River's Promises

All day, we have willingly let ourselves become seduced and enraptured by the river's

promises of record-sized arctic char, and we have quietly lost ourselves in all the hectic activity. Now that we have journeyed back to the camp, full of impressions and as quiet as a couple of staunch believers in church, something far more comprehensive and essential intrudes. Neither of us can pinpoint exactly what it is, but it is something far more significant than the sum of the fish we have caught, something seminal and epochal. The river has changed us and its indomitable willpower and life nerve is now within our hearts.

The hydroplane leaves tomorrow morning and there are no guarantees that I will ever see Tree River again. But as I creep into my sleeping bag, close my eyes and wait for sleep to overpower me, I am certain that, somehow, the river's furtive magic will haunt me for the rest of my life. I too have lost my heart to Tree River! 

No world record but the size of the fish from this river will haunt Rasmus for years to come.



Fast File

The arctic char in Tree River are the world's largest, and the majority of all existing world records stem from this river. This, for instance, is the case with three line records, the fly fishing record, and – last but not least – the biggest arctic char ever landed on a rod and reel: a giant of 14.77kg.

Presumably, there are several good explanations as to why the Tree River arctic char grow to such incredible sizes. They have ample amounts of prey fish to feed on in the Arctic Ocean and in the estuary of the river, plus there's an extreme form of natural selection in play when it comes to the spawning. In effect, only the biggest and most powerful fish are capable of climbing the many waterfalls and torrential currents. A more weighty argument, however, is probably that the Tree River arctic char are of mixed blood. There are lake char in the river too, and throughout the ages hybridisation must have occurred.

New investigations have proven that the Tree River arctic char have traces of lake char DNA in their genetic codes, and genes from lake char – a species that grows to 35 to 40kg. This might explain how the Tree River arctic char get to be so enormous compared to other strains.