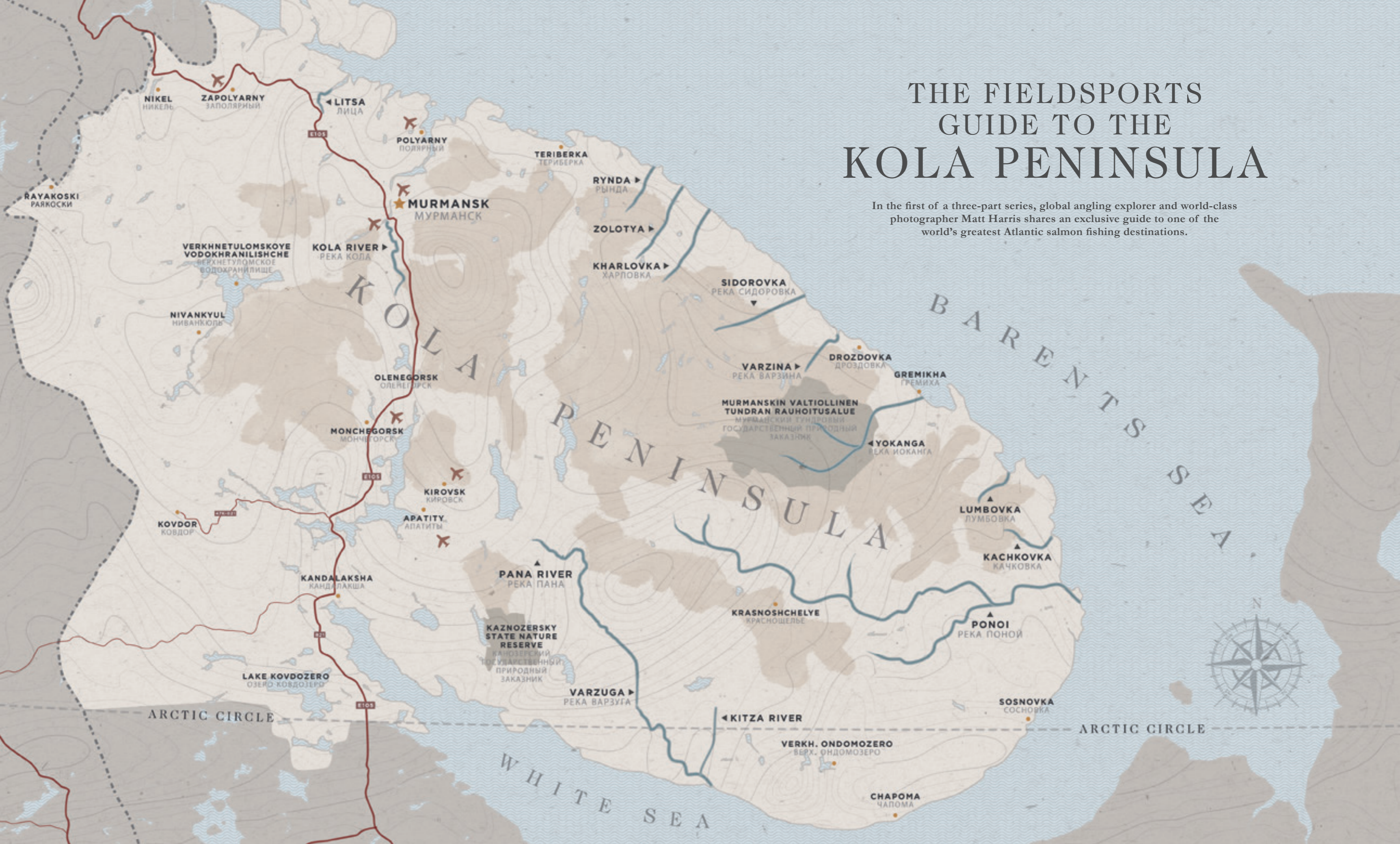


# THE FIELDSPORTS GUIDE TO THE KOLA PENINSULA

In the first of a three-part series, global angling explorer and world-class photographer Matt Harris shares an exclusive guide to one of the world's greatest Atlantic salmon fishing destinations.





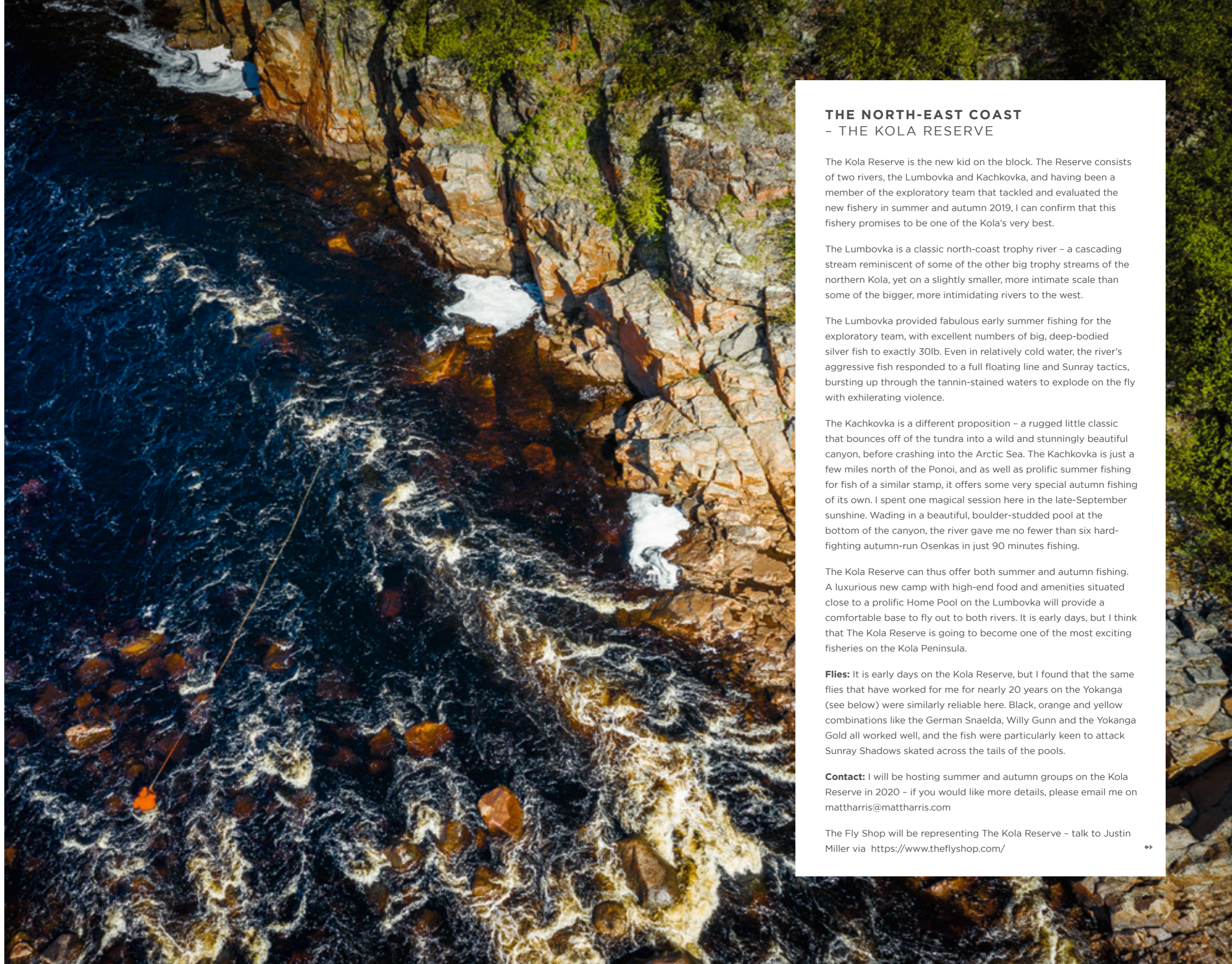
Here at home, our beloved Atlantic salmon seem beset by challenges on all sides. Open-cage salmon farming, dams, netting, water abstraction, pollution and habitat degradation are just a few of the problems that have caused many of our salmon populations to nose-dive into steep decline in the last few decades.

Many other Atlantic salmon fisheries in Europe and further afield are suffering a similarly depressing downturn too. However, one region continues to offer fishing that is reminiscent of another time, when fish were healthy and plentiful, and were relatively untroubled by the numerous man-made hurdles that now impede *Salmo salar* in most parts of its catchment.

The Kola Peninsula is the vast, wild region straddling Russia's Arctic circle to the east of Murmansk. It continues to offer stupendous salmon-fishing that contrasts ever more sharply with the tragically declining quality of our own fisheries with each passing year.

This bleak but beautiful wonderland is Europe's last great wilderness, and its pristine rivers can provide everything any salmon angler could surely wish for. In the south and east of the peninsula, huge numbers of fish provide hectic sport, while the big, brawling rivers of the northern coast are home to some of the very biggest and strongest Atlantic salmon on earth.

For any avid salmon-fisher, the Kola really does offer the last opportunity to fish for Atlantic salmon in a truly wild and utterly untamed environment. Perhaps the biggest problem for any angler fortunate enough to be able to afford the cost of fishing on one of the Kola's special rivers is knowing which river best suits their pocket, aspirations and abilities. Over the last 20 years, I've been lucky enough to fish all of the Kola's most celebrated rivers and seen what each is capable of. In this article, I've tried to describe what each of these great fisheries can offer, and what anglers need in order to get the best from a trip.



## THE NORTH-EAST COAST - THE KOLA RESERVE

The Kola Reserve is the new kid on the block. The Reserve consists of two rivers, the Lumbovka and Kachkovka, and having been a member of the exploratory team that tackled and evaluated the new fishery in summer and autumn 2019, I can confirm that this fishery promises to be one of the Kola's very best.

The Lumbovka is a classic north-coast trophy river - a cascading stream reminiscent of some of the other big trophy streams of the northern Kola, yet on a slightly smaller, more intimate scale than some of the bigger, more intimidating rivers to the west.

The Lumbovka provided fabulous early summer fishing for the exploratory team, with excellent numbers of big, deep-bodied silver fish to exactly 30lb. Even in relatively cold water, the river's aggressive fish responded to a full floating line and Sunray tactics, bursting up through the tannin-stained waters to explode on the fly with exhilarating violence.

The Kachkovka is a different proposition - a rugged little classic that bounces off of the tundra into a wild and stunningly beautiful canyon, before crashing into the Arctic Sea. The Kachkovka is just a few miles north of the Ponoï, and as well as prolific summer fishing for fish of a similar stamp, it offers some very special autumn fishing of its own. I spent one magical session here in the late-September sunshine. Wading in a beautiful, boulder-studded pool at the bottom of the canyon, the river gave me no fewer than six hard-fighting autumn-run Osenkas in just 90 minutes fishing.

The Kola Reserve can thus offer both summer and autumn fishing. A luxurious new camp with high-end food and amenities situated close to a prolific Home Pool on the Lumbovka will provide a comfortable base to fly out to both rivers. It is early days, but I think that The Kola Reserve is going to become one of the most exciting fisheries on the Kola Peninsula.

**Flies:** It is early days on the Kola Reserve, but I found that the same flies that have worked for me for nearly 20 years on the Yokanga (see below) were similarly reliable here. Black, orange and yellow combinations like the German Snaelda, Willy Gunn and the Yokanga Gold all worked well, and the fish were particularly keen to attack Sunray Shadows skated across the tails of the pools.

**Contact:** I will be hosting summer and autumn groups on the Kola Reserve in 2020 - if you would like more details, please email me on [mattharris@mattharris.com](mailto:mattharris@mattharris.com)

The Fly Shop will be representing The Kola Reserve - talk to Justin Miller via <https://www.theflyshop.com/> ➡





## THE SOUTH COAST – THE VARZUGA, KITZA AND PANA

For sheer numbers, the Varzuga and its tributaries are hard to beat. Countless thousands of fish come barreling out of the White Sea and into this big, relatively low-gradient system in May and June each year. The fishing that this prolific system can offer can be utterly frantic. Impossible numbers of salmon are caught most years, with Varzuga regular Neil French recording a remarkable 481 fish in a two-week trip a few years back. If you want non-stop action, this may be the place for you, but don't expect monsters; the fish are typically 6-10lb in weight, but fish up to and even beyond 20lb are caught most years. The Varzuga is a wonderful place to learn to fish for salmon. A week here is a 'crash course' that will teach you more than

you can learn in decades on many of our home rivers, and by the end of that week you will have almost certainly caught more fish.

When compared with most UK salmon rivers, pound per pound, it is an absolute bargain. The lower and middle river are big water and reward the more proficient caster, but the upper beats and tributaries offer more intimate fishing with smaller, lighter rods and even single-handers can make for great sport. I managed 19 fish from the stunningly beautiful Pana on one golden afternoon back in 2002, mainly from Ivan's Pool, wading down the middle of the river and casting either side of me with bombers and hitched sunrays. That is

the kind of unforgettable experience that the Varzuga system has to offer.

**Flies:** Anything. The salmon of the Varzuga really are not fussy. I had a spectacular late-season week catching fish after fish using a big foam Chernobyl Ant, designed for Patagonian trout, skated across the surface. If you find a fly that they won't eat, consider throwing it in the river.

**Contact:** [www.roxtons.com](http://www.roxtons.com)



## THE VARZINA, DROZDOVKA AND SIDOROVKA

Just a little to the West of the Yokanga lies the stunningly beautiful Varzina, and it's little sisters, the Drozdovka and Siderovka.

The Varzina is a pearl. Scything between the silver-birch forests, this beguiling stream offers any number of beautiful glassy pools, punctuated by long, powerful rapids that have helped the river's beautiful trophy salmon to evolve. The Varzina is considerably smaller than some of its illustrious neighbours, and the entire river can be comfortably covered by a competent spey caster.

The recent imposition of a new 'one angler per beat' system gives Rods an embarrassment of riches in terms of the amount of water that they have to fish

each day, and makes fishing this beautiful river a very special pleasure.

Classic pools like Big Falls, Long walk, Boulders and Finn can now be fished at a leisurely pace, with no rush to beat your partner to the next killer spot. Many of the pools offer exquisite, glassy tail-outs, and I often swap the river's signature killer fly, the Golden Killer, for a full floating line and a large, ruffle-hitched Sunray.

Don't be put off by the river's relatively humble size when compared with its larger neighbours. Be in no doubt, the Varzina is capable of producing some truly huge fish. Every year, fish of 30lb and more come from the Varzina too. The legendary fish caught here by Sir Seton Wills way back in 1995

measured a staggering 57½" with a 19" girth, and it remains one of the very biggest recorded on the Kola rivers in recent times.

The Varzina's little satellite sisters, the bewitching little Drozdovka and the rugged, gin-clear Sidorovka are also both capable of producing remarkable fish, and the Drozdovka gave me a 31lb hen fish back in 2009.

**Flies:** The Varzina seems to respond well to Black, Gold and Yellow flies, and the favourite Golden Killer is a simple variation on this theme. Sunrays are, as ever, also hugely effective, whilst the Snaelda is murderous in the high, cold water of the early season.

**Contact:** [www.flyodyssey.co.uk](http://www.flyodyssey.co.uk)





## THE NORTH – YOKANGA

The Yokanga is the wildest and most rugged of the Kola's salmon rivers. Big, brawling and in early season, truly formidable.

This savage maelstrom of a river has forged a race of trophy salmon that are deep-bodied, muscular and uniquely equipped to break a salmon angler's heart. The Russian PINRO Polar Research Institute has identified the Yokanga fish as the largest strain of salmon to run the Kola Peninsula, and numerous fish of 30lb are caught almost every week of the season. The biggest in recent memory was a chrome-silver 47lb fish caught about five years ago, but stories of bigger fish lost are legion on Yokanga.

Be warned. The Yokanga is not for everyone – its big, boulder-strewn pools require aggressive wading and big casts. Most pools can be fished from the boat, but to get the best from this river, you really want to be able to throw a long line and wade safely but confidently in what are sometimes powerful currents. Wade with extreme

care. A solid and reliable wading stick should be at the very top of your packing list, no matter how fit you are.

The reward for tackling this brutish river is a chance to tussle with simply the most savage salmon that I have ever encountered. I've experienced some brutal battles with any number of freakishly large fish hooked and lost, in some cases well over an hour into the fight. However, despite the heartbreak that these leviathans regularly dish out, things do occasionally, somehow, go your way and I've been lucky to catch fish to 37lb from the Yokanga's wild waters.

There are two lodges available to the angler seeking to take on the Yokanga's singular challenge. The Middle Camp offers luxurious accommodation, great food, and, in terms of the fishing, big, defined pools that hold fish all season long.

The new Lower Camp, close to the rough little military town at Gremikha, will offer much more comfortable accommodation than the notorious

'boot camp' of former days. This camp is for fit, mobile anglers who want to experience the ultimate in rough-house, heavy-duty salmon fishing on the brawling waters of the lower river.

Hooking a big fresh salmon on the Yokanga can be one of the most unforgettable experiences in all of fly fishing. Every salmon angler should experience it. Do up your drag and say your prayers – you are in for a wild ride.

**Flies:** The Yokanga is heavily tanin-stained, and thus flies from the orange side of the spectrum work well. In early season, look no further than the lethal German Snaelda. Later in the season, Willy Gunns and Templedogs tied with similar hues work well, although the Green Highlander is a great change fly if you move a fish.

**Contact:** I have recently been nominated as a Yokanga Lodge ambassador and will be hosting weeks on the Yokanga in 2020. For more information, email [mattharris@mattharris.com](mailto:mattharris@mattharris.com)

[www.yokanga.com](http://www.yokanga.com)





## THE EAST COAST – THE PONOI

At the far eastern end of the peninsula, lies Kola's longest and largest river, the Ponoï, which tumbles into the frigid waters of the Arctic Sea. From May until October, the Ponoï is a non-stop salmon-fest with impossible numbers of wonderful, deep-bodied fish coming to all manner of flies and tactics.

There aren't many places where you can catch salmon on an ear-plug, but the Ponoï is one such river. I did it one September morning on the Ryabaga camp's celebrated Home Pool – just to see if it could be done.

Like the Varzuga, the Ponoï offers the perfect testing ground to instill confidence. It's a place to experiment with flies and techniques – bombers, hitched flies and, yes, ear-plugs will all be attacked with enthusiasm – and your new-found faith in these methods will stay with you and increase your repertoire on subsequent visits to tougher, less benevolent fisheries.

The Ponoï is a big river and although I have enjoyed some great sessions wading the river, veteran anglers can also enjoy great sport fishing from the operation's comfortable and spacious boats. The river also has one very special jewel in its glittering crown. As the first frosts of autumn start to spread across the Kola, and the Northern Lights and the golden hues of autumn light up the tundra, the Ponoï's legendary Osenkas come charging into the river. These autumn runners are a rare strain of *Salmo salar*. Ocean-bright and as fat as pigs, these fish come into the river a full year before spawning the following autumn. They then remain a second winter under the ice before returning to the sea, and are thus in the river for a remarkable 20 months without feeding. This means that on entering the river, they are carrying enough muscle and body fat to see them through not one but two of the Kola's staggeringly harsh winters making these fish, pound-for-pound, as powerful as any Atlantic salmon that swims.

You are unlikely to catch a leviathan on the Ponoï – most of the fish are between 8-14lb, with the odd 20-pounder if you are very lucky – but you should look forward to a million thrills and spills with hordes of hard-fighting brutes.

**Flies:** Head Guide Max Mamaev's Ponoï Nail fly is king here, but, like Varzuga, this is a river that will have you scanning your fly-box for something that DOESN'T work. Other great choices include the Ponoï Hammer, Sunray Shadow, Bombers, earplugs(!)... you name it. Fish them on the surface in all but the coldest weather for maximum visual kicks.

**Contact:** [www.frontierstrvl.co.uk](http://www.frontierstrvl.co.uk)



## THE KHARLOVKA AND EASTERN LITZA

The Atlantic Salmon Reserve consists of two camps that fish four rivers. While the Rhynda and even the tiny Zolotyá offer wonderful fly water and can produce some remarkable big fish, it is the Kharlovka and Eastern Litza that are celebrated as the real 'tiger country' of the reserve.

The Kharlovka is a big powerful brute – its lower holding pools are very close to the sea, and a big fish hooked here in early season may well do its best to drag you back to the Arctic Ocean that it left behind a few short hours or even minutes ago. I lost a fish at Julian's Rock on the first day of the season in 2005 that took me stumbling downstream before taking off around the island and spitting out the hook 300m from where I standing. It was simply colossal, and that salmon haunts me to this day. Fish of 30lb and more regularly feature in the Kharlovka

catch-book, and a 34lb fish that I managed to wrestle onto the grass of the Kharlovka Home Pool one evening before dinner is typical of the kind of big, bruising trophies that this river is rightly famous for.

The Kharlovka's neighbour, the Eastern Litza is a salmon fisher's paradise. During a week at the Kharlovka Base Camp, anglers have the chance to fly out to the Litza, and stay in the tiny tented camp situated between the upper and lower beats. The Eastern Litza is a beguiling mixture of glassy glides, long riffles and golden tail-outs that can play a brief home to some extraordinarily large salmon. The Eastern Litza's impassable falls are barely six miles up from the sea, but the short stretch between those falls and the sea offers magical fishing in legendary pools like Litza Falls, Flat Stone, Ledge and Tent Pool.

A maximum of four anglers fish the Litza every day, and to wander downstream from Reindeer Pool, with the wild winds whistling off the Arctic Ocean barely a mile away and the chance of a big chrome fish in the long, beautiful tail of Snow Bank, or the notorious heartbreaker Military is one of the most special experiences in all of salmon fishing.

Kharlovka is a very special salmon river. Litza is magical.

**Flies:** In early season, the Kharlovka and Litza respond well to black and green Templedog patterns and the classic Ice Maiden tube. As the water warms up, hitched Sunrays work well and so do Bombers using a single handed rod. In autumn, Red Frances and small hitched tubes can be deadly.

**Contact:** [www.kharlovka.com](http://www.kharlovka.com)







## CONCLUSION

The Kola Peninsula is Europe's last great wilderness, and it offers some of the very best Atlantic salmon fishing on earth. If you are passionate about salmon-fishing then put aside any prejudices you have about Russian bureaucracy or long helicopter rides and try to experience these special fisheries for yourself.

While prime time spots on these special rivers can be eye-wateringly expensive, it is possible to pick up a real bargain in early and late season. Believe me, even a tough week on the Kola will likely compare very favourably with salmon fishing that you may have experienced elsewhere. Walk-in weeks, 'shoulder' weeks and newly opened autumn fisheries offer an affordable chance to tackle these peerless salmon rivers.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Harris is an ambassador for Yokanga Lodge, and he hosts trips on the Yokanga and other rivers on the Kola Peninsula every year. Matt can advise on all aspects of fishing these special rivers. If you are interested in fishing with him, email [mattharris@mattharris.com](mailto:mattharris@mattharris.com) or visit [www.mattharrisflyfishing.com](http://www.mattharrisflyfishing.com) FS