



CHRIS SUMMERS HEADS FOR NORTHERN INDIA TO PURSUE THE LEGENDARY GOLDEN MAHSEER

RIVERS OF GOLD

India might not be everyone's first choice of angling destination, but this year I wanted something different. I had been toying with ideas of France and

Spain for a few weeks, but when you finally add up how much it's going to cost for travel, fishing, food, bait and drinks, you quickly arrive somewhere around the £800 mark.

Taking this into consideration, I started looking further away for angling destinations, deciding to have a fishing trip and holiday rolled into one. I started trawling through the hundreds of websites that cater for the

angling holiday market, and found that anything associated with mahseer fishing was very expensive and the packages available were way out of my budget.

However, I then stumbled across a group of people who

have set up an angling camp where the main focus is on ecotourism and conservation of fish, especially the golden mahseer. The company I used can tailor a package and organise as many days angling (or other activities) in the

Corbett park as you wish. The normal cost for everything, including travel, food, accommodation, bait, gillies, guides and even complimentary nature walks in the evening is about 120 US dollars a day. That's about £65, so it is very

reasonably priced, and a bit more adventurous than a puddle in France.

The Van Ghat lodge where I fished and stayed is situated on the edge of the Corbett Tiger Reserve and right on the River Ramganga. The lodge is reached



Above: My first golden mahseer – but this was just a taste of things to come

Left: Looking down on Pool Five. I'm not sure I was ready for what I was about to see!

by night train to the railhead of Ramnagar, which takes about six hours from Delhi. From there you are met by one of the staff members and travel to the park in an open-top jeep, through some of the most breathtaking scenery in the world. This journey takes about two hours, and the final part of the ride involves a steep descent down the valley to the river below, which we crossed six times in the jeep before reaching the camp bridge.

The fishing camp is part of a sustainable conservation project being undertaken by the Forestry Commission in the state of Uttarachal, to try to raise the number of mahseer in this river and other rivers in the area.

GREAT THREAT

The mahseer have been under great threat over the last few years from poaching and bombing, so it is vital that this project works in order to preserve the ever falling numbers of these magnificent fish.

The camp gives 5% of the annual turnover to the local villagers and communities, and in turn provides secure jobs for



After 100 miles upstream, the first crocodile was seen. It was a truly extraordinary sight.

for every rock and gully in an attempt to break free, but after about two minutes I had the fish under control and safely landed by my ghillie.

Once the fish was out of the water I had time to catch my breath. On inspection, however, the fish was only about 5lb, and the thought of a 50lb fish really got me thinking. If I usually fished one of these fish, it was going to be a real challenge to land it!

By lunchtime it was very hot and there was little shade, so we decided to head back to the camp and wait for evening before trying again. As I left the river, I felt a little disappointed by the size of the mahaseer in the river. I had been four very big fish, but only through a shoal of about a thousand smaller specimens, and I thought I was going to be very hard to get a big lot if there were many mouths to feed down there.

On the way back to the camp our guide showed us the

"I LOOKED DOWN INTO THE POOL 40 FEET BELOW AND WAS MET BY THE MOST MIND-BLOWING SIGHT I HAVE EVER SEEN IN MY SHORT ANGLING CAREER. AMONGST THE SMALL FISH I COULD SEE THE MONSTERS... AND BOY WERE THEY BIG!"

signposts of tigers (prints left in the sand and cast around by the river). We were only about 200 metres away from the camp, and the tiger had previously walked in the same direction as we had. It was quite a strange feeling knowing that there were wild animals around. Animals are rare, however, and signs are occasional, so it is a rare to see one during the day.

Day two and three were pretty much the same as the first. We caught six fish each day between 5lb and 13lb, and my girlfriend, even managed her first golden mahaseer – a beautiful fish of 12lb. All were happy to camp that night, but no water here had I tried, I will had to switch these mosquitoes sitting under the rocks, not daring to come near my tent.

TOO QUICK

Day four came around as fast, and my stay in Var Ghat was so camp out guide showed us the

had stayed up late the previous night, discussing the past three days of fishing and trying to piece together what we had been doing wrong. Ahram:

TACKLE AND RIGS

Tackle and rigs are pretty simple in the style of fishing. All you need is a good strong reel of about 15-12t 30-40lb to and a good reliable reel that can hold at least 200 yards of 20-40lb mono. Hooks need to be strong but not overly heavy, a good medium-weight silver longshank soft shank. Also, some good lures will be useful. I found the Phasler G spring in sizes 1-4 to be fine and lured every fish I hooked on there.

Lure needs to be clear as possible, and fluorocarbon in heavy lures could be a very handy tool. Take some good quality unhooking tools with you as well, as some of the fish can be very deeply hooked.

Lure needs to be about 11-2oz, so there's no need for big heavy weights. The Phasler range of lures would be perfect to match the river fish.

For lure fishing, a good selection of Nippo spinners in natural colours, and different weights and styles, will suffice, plus a small selection of 2-3in plugs, again in natural and blue colours.



Good-quality tackle is essential for this type of adventure angling

started by saying that we were too eager to cast, and that we would only get one chance each day to hook the biggest fish in the pool, which would mean sitting on our hands and waiting until the 'fat' right'. That might be five minutes or it could be an hour, but Ahram said, "When you know, you know."

We talked until the early hours and madness was ebbing at our eyelids. We all departed to our lodges for a well-deserved rest, but with all the talk of legendary fish and age-old tactics my mind was a maelstrom of speculation. I think my biggest fear was not catching and going home only with tales of 150lb fish, not the moment I'd built myself up for, but I was still hopeful for the next day.

The morning came around

with lightning speed and the same feeling with which I'd gone to bed was now starting all over again. We ran our gillies at the steps to the river and made our way downstream. This took about half an hour and we had to cross the river three times on foot before reaching the famous Pool 5.

We made our way up the steep side of the rock and once again positioned ourselves well back from the edge, to avoid speaking the fish. This was my first visit to Pool 5 and I really wasn't expecting what I saw.

MIND-BLOWING

I looked down into the pool 40 feet below and was met by the most mind-blowing sight I have ever seen in my short angling career. Amongst the small fish I could see the monsters... and boy were they big! The biggest I saw must have weighed upwards of 50lb and was at least the best in length. It was a truly awesome sight, and I really couldn't wait to cast, but I was told that we would wait for the first rays of light to hit the water before we did.

Ten minutes passed and the fish were rising up below, swirling and rolling in the crystal-clear water, as if to say "Come and catch me!" But we waited. "OK," said Ahram, as we made our way to the ledge of the rock and looked down at our prize below. "This time..."

Which then I opened the ball arm on the reel and waited for one of the big fish to push the small fish away. Once the hapless Ahram threw the ball of 200 yards of line out at the biggest fish, nearly 50ft of line and it began to feather the line as to be kept in direct contact with the fish, and as soon as it hit the water I engaged the ball arm back over immediately the reel arched over and a huge mahaseer shot upstream at a speed that would shock any angler. I had never in my life heard a reel make such noise as the fish struck the river.

The fight was hard, and the fish heaved for every available snag and rock. Ahram had already told us that if the fish made it to the rapids on the right side of the swim it would be all over, but luckily the fish

MAHSEER CONSERVATION

The State Government of Uttarakhand has recently issued management rights to fishing associations to manage waters on the Ramganga river. The Varghat river lodge, run by the Mahaseer Conservation Society, is the perfect base to fish around 24 km of the Ramganga upstream of the Corbett Park. The locals are the direct stakeholders of the venture and the project contributes 5% of its turnover with the immediate neighbours – the villages of Changan and Satali. An additional 80% of the profit goes directly to them. The Mahaseer Sportfishing and Conservation Project has been funded as a blueprint for similar conservation models in the Himalayas.

Over the past few years, Varghat river lodge has hosted anglers from across the globe who have rated it as the best fishing best of health India. For details log on to www.varghat.com



My girlfriend Ella's first mahaseer from the Ramganga

strapped deep in the main body of the pool and was landed after about 15 minutes. These fish are strong and every time you think you have them beaten they tear off again with lightning speed. Once we had taken the fish to the shore and returned the fish, all that was left to do was to thank my guide, Ahram, and shake him by the hand.

Safety back at the lodge, and all shuffling, we shared a well-earned diversity at the biggest fish, beautiful lunch in the dining but as we talked about what had happened over the last few days, as Ahram went to make our way back to the train station and then onwards to Delhi. These few days and the experiences I had will stay with me for the rest of my life – well, until next year anyway!

As I said at the start of the article, India might not be to everyone's taste, but if you like good weather, amazing food, brilliant people, stunning scenery and wildlife, get your self to India. Oh, and the fishing is great, too! ☺

ESSENTIAL TO CATFISH

Chris Summers

FROM LAKES

OUR LUCKY WINNERS

The three winners of our **Prize Draw for Catfish** are... **Chris Ingle** of **Donner**, **Tom** of **Donner**, and **Mark** of **Donner**.

Winners of **Donner** are... **Chris Ingle** of **Donner**, **Tom** of **Donner**, and **Mark** of **Donner**.

The overall winner is... **Chris Ingle** of **Donner**.

Congratulations! Your prizes are on their way!

Want to book this space?

Call Chris Ball on: 01590 678400

Photo: Chris Summers



Me and the guys - the men who made it all possible

the local boys who work on the river as guides, guards and river leapers. Also, 20% of the day permit goes to the same fund and it seems to be working, as there is only a small amount of poaching in these areas today.

Our first sight of the camp was at 7am on our first day. We walked over the bridge and up the path towards the lodge, where we were greeted by all the staff members and treated to a cup of tea and a hearty

breakfast, during which I was introduced to my guide, Ashram. We talked about tactics and baits and respected the selection of lures, baits and flies that I had taken with me.

After breakfast the first job of the day was to mix up the bait called Atta paste. This didn't involve a trip to the local bait shop, but a short walk around the river bank to collect fresh cow dung. Yes, you read that correctly, cow dung. This is

turn was combined with a mixture of maize flour, turmeric and river water to create a super-sticky paste that's a yellow colour from the dung and spices.

After a healthy portion of bait was made we headed down to what is known as Pool One, where I would get my first sight of these powerful fish. We climbed a steep rock on the side of the river and positioned ourselves well back from the edge so as not to spook the fish

in the crystal clear waters below.

Ashram baited the size 4 tangle with the Atta paste and moulded it round the hook into a pous about the size of a golf ball. This was then placed inside a different, more coarsely textured Atta paste and moulded into a ball about the size of a fist.

Once baited and ready to go, we began feeding the small fish and waiting for some of the larger residents to show

themselves among the boulders and overhanging rocks in Pool One. After about 30 seconds a large black shape began to move across the pool, followed by another, and then another! It was an amazing sight to see such big fish swimming so gracefully right under our feet, and with such ease. The angler can hold their in the most challenging swims for long periods of time, so it is no wonder they grow so big and strong.

MASSIVE SURGE

The first cast saw a massive surge for the bait and for about 10 seconds it was nothing as hundreds of mud-eater went for the bait, but before I knew it one of the smaller fish picked up the bait and immediately headed for the top of the pool and the rapids just after a large rock. I put a massive amount of pressure on the fish, but even with 18lb line and a 20lb reel I thought I would never stop it. The reel sang as the fish headed



A fresh tiger poxprint was shown to us en route to the river

"AFTER ABOUT 30 SECONDS A LARGE BLACK SHAPE BEGAN TO MOVE ACROSS THE POOL, FOLLOWED BY ANOTHER, AND THEN ANOTHER"

SEASON & TIMING

The season in the Himalayas is quite a small one, with the monsoon washing away the roads and most habitable areas during this time. The season runs from October to May, so it's a great place to visit if you are looking to beat the winter blues and catch a few while your mates are still blanking back home.



The fish of my dreams, and a moment I will never forget