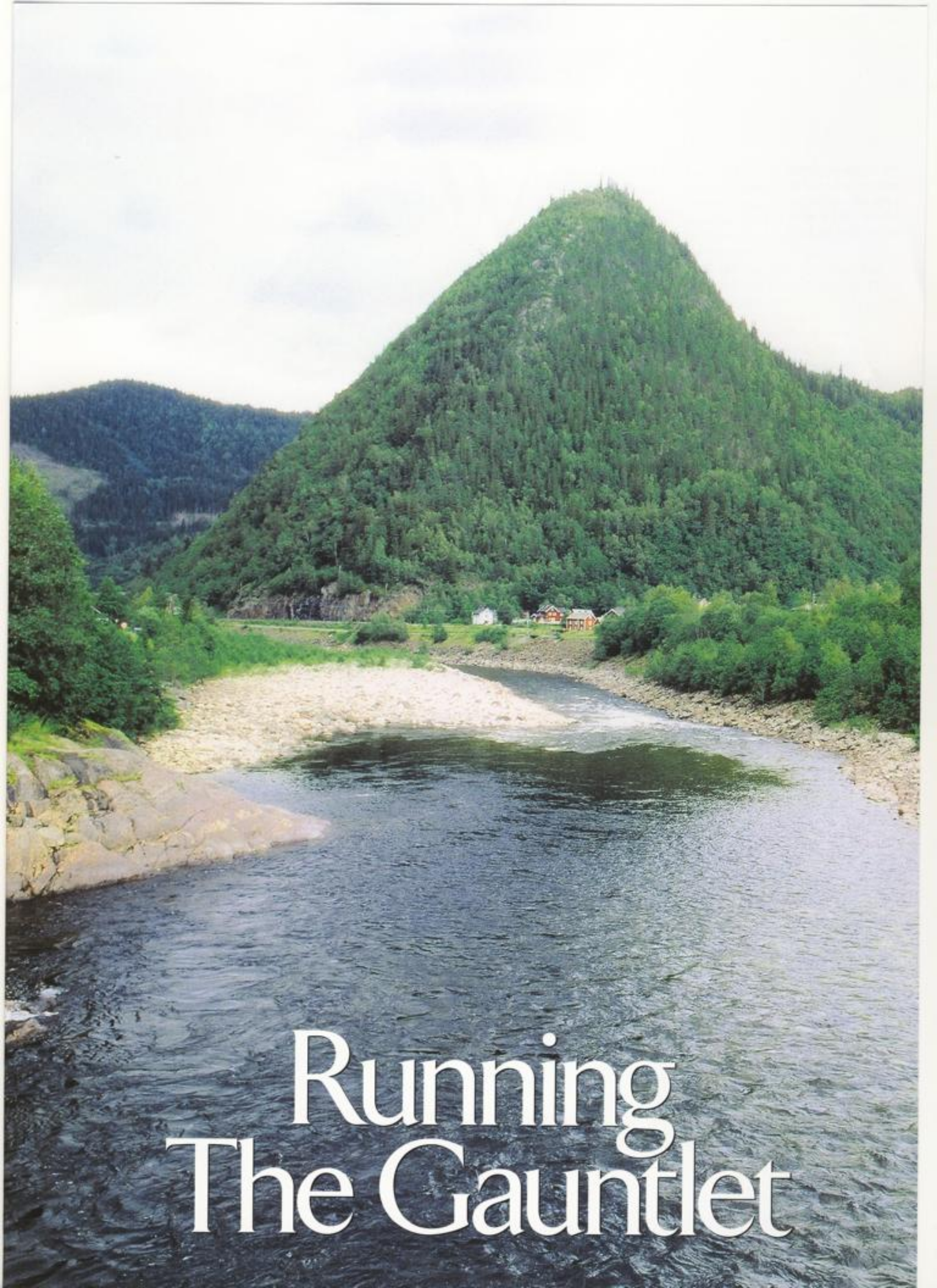


Running The Gauntlet

The magnificent Bridge pool on the Gaula. The white water below the tail is where the writer had to follow his fish.

Running The Gauntlet

TERRY OLDFIELD faces an exciting challenge — taming a salmon in the infamous white water on Norway's River Gaula

WHEN I MOVED to Australia two years ago, I promised myself an annual trip back to at least one of my favourite salmon haunts. Last June, it was the Norwegian Flyfishers' Club stretch of the River Gaula in Norway, which is run superbly by Manfred Raguse and Valentin Maul.

As I boarded a plane on a cool winter's day in Brisbane for the 12,000-mile flight, I was looking forward to a nostalgic glimpse of the English summer. Sadly, that wasn't to be. Heathrow was basking in searing 93-degree heat and the weather in Oslo was much the same but, as we headed still farther north towards Trondheim, the weather turned refreshingly cloudy. It was starting to look very promising indeed.

A week earlier, the river had been very low, so I was relieved to find the gauge a metre above normal summer level. I had arrived a day early to try to shake off the jet-lag but, in the Land of the Midnight Sun, time can get very confusing. Not that I care when I'm fishing...

Arriving at the NFC's clubhouse, eager to get the season rolling, I found that Manfred had given me the option of joining him to fish for the early-spring monsters on the River Stjordal. The Junction Pool there is famous for huge fish, but this year I decided to start on more familiar territory. It takes me a while to warm up and, anyway, I wasn't intending to fish too hard on the first night because the early-season fishing is generally better during the day.

Valentin and I were ready to go at midnight on the New Pool. There was an icy wind blowing upstream and it was freezing, even in Gore-tex waders with all the latest undergarment technology. We drew pebbles — biggest to be first down the pool — and I made my first cast of the season.

To my astonishment, I had a take almost immediately. The fish made one searing run and then jumped, displaying a bright-silver flank. Then it gave up and came in like a sack of potatoes. I had landed my first Gaula kelt and I was devastated. I hadn't seen or heard of one here before. Nobody I have spoken to since has ever caught a kelt in the Gaula — including Manfred, who has fished the river for over 30 years.

We released four more kelts that night and saw plenty jumping. These ocean-ready fish had obviously been waiting for the spring flood, which never came, and were slowly dropping back towards the sea, resting from pool to pool.

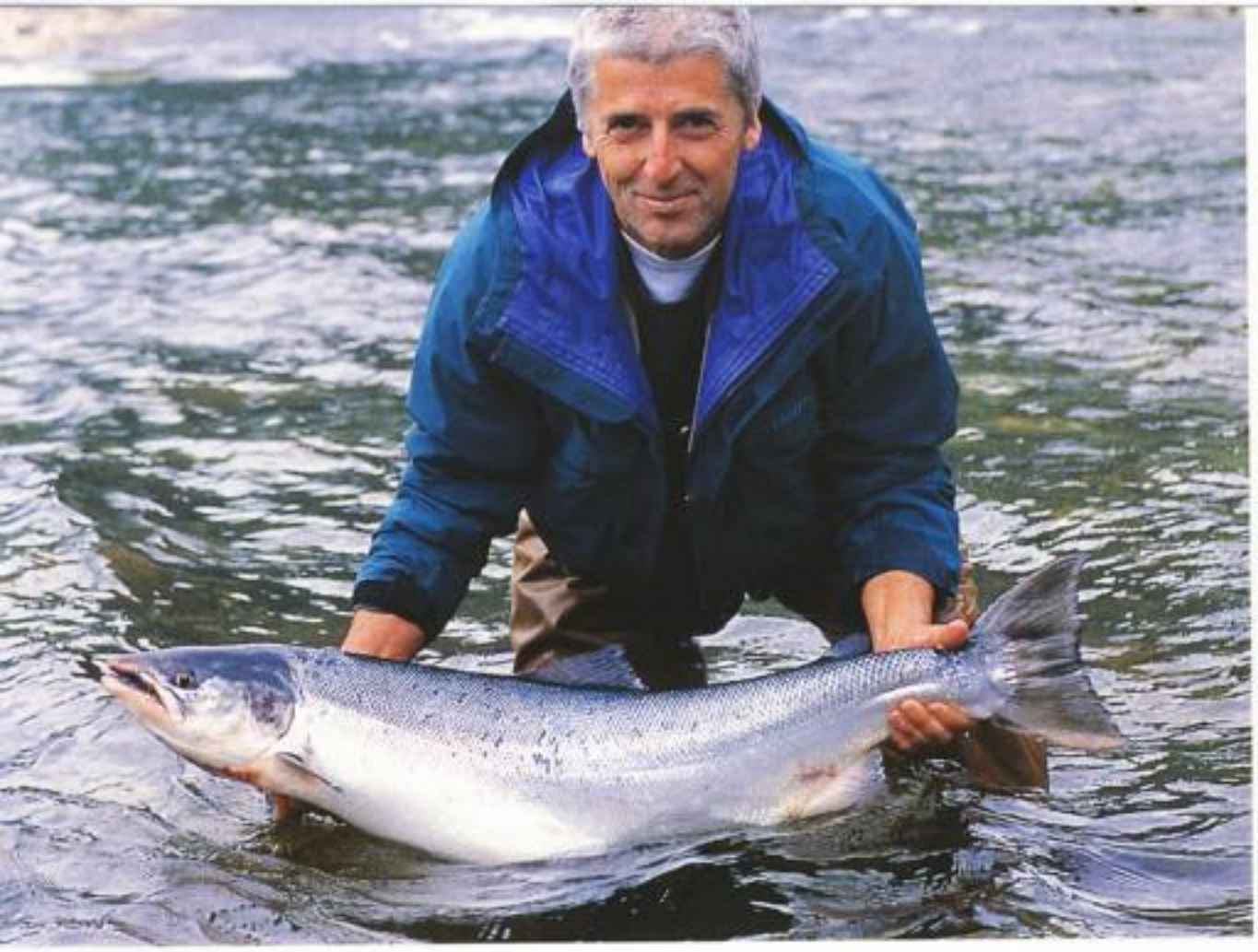
I went to bed at 4 am, feeling rather disappointed. To make matters worse, it turned out that Manfred had had a great night's fishing. He'd lost a big fish just ten minutes into the new season but eventually grassed a 21½ lb fish at five in the morning — the first NFC fish of the season. Michael Werner, editor of the German magazine *Fliegenfischen*, who was fishing with him, landed a 22-pounder.

After I'd had a bit of a lie-in, the first day passed without even a whisper of a fish on our water, although there were the usual reports of locals using salmon as stepping stones to cross the river further downstream. In the evening, I made the rounds, reconnecting with the river, sitting on familiar rocks and remembering — all the time hoping for something to happen. I fished until 3 am and then went to bed, still feeling a bit out of sorts.

> "He grassed a 21½ lb fish at five in the morning"

Early next day, I heard that Chris Vanseer had just taken the first NFC Gaula fish — a 17¾-pounder from Home Pool. Needless to say, it wasn't long before my line was once again snaking out over the river, searching for a fish.

Evening came and I hadn't seen or touched a salmon all day. Tired and hungry, I went off to pick up all the latest news on the local grapevine. This has several components: the notice-boards down at the car-park and campsite, the clubhouse book where the fish are recorded and, of course, those other lost souls wandering about the place, after a hard and fruitless session on the river. Comfortingly, there were quite a few of them about that evening and I was quickly back on the river. After all, I told myself, "there's never a →



Against all odds: Terry Oldfield with his superb 24-pounder.

Factfile

FISHING

The NFC is a private company that leases some top-class fly-fishing beats on Norway's Gaula and Forra rivers. It employs English-speaking guides and offers a variety of accommodation in hotels or the NFC's own riverside lodges. The season runs from June 1 to August 31.

FLIGHTS

Flights can be arranged, mostly through Oslo and a one-hour flight to Trondheim. Hire cars can also be included for the 1½-hour drive from Trondheim airport to the Gaula beats.

CONTACTS

Manfred Raguse, Norwegian Flyfishers' Club, Robert-Blum-Str. 5B, D-22453 Hamburg, Germany, tel: 0049 4058 92302 or visit the website: www.nfc-online.com.

RUNNING THE GAUNTLET CONTINUED

← fish caught without a fly in the water."

The end of another pleasant but blank session on the Long Pool saw me packing up for the day — or was it night? — at 3 am. I was due on the Bridge Pool next day from noon, so I slept in and had a lazy morning playing around with lines, tackling up and getting excited again.

The Bridge is one of those pools that takes a while to get the hang of. It is a place where the salmon are good takers because it provides the only respite between two long sections of white water. The 250-metre stretch below it is widely known as "The Gauntlet" because, when a hooked fish decides to leave the pool, it takes a pretty fit — not to mention brave — angler to follow him down.

One thing you can't do is "run" the Gauntlet. To begin with, the fish will take a lot of line before he stops and there are some huge boulders to navigate on your way downstream. It's tricky enough without a big salmon on the end of 200 metres or more of line, bucking and bellying downstream.

The previous year I had been fishing with Chris Tarrant when he hooked a fish that took him down the Gauntlet — I drove down to meet him with his landing net and was perched on a boulder watching his 30 lb-plus salmon drift slowly towards the waiting net, when it came off the hook...

My first time down the Gauntlet this year was not the happiest of experiences. I hooked a fish that took off downstream like a rocket. I was halfway down the Gauntlet when I came right to the end of my backing. Luckily the hook pulled out when the tension hit the spool knot — otherwise I would have lost the lot.

After that dismal failure, I went straight back to the hotel and wound on an extra 100 metres of Orvis Hi Viz orange backing. If I were lucky enough to hook another fish it would be helpful to know how much backing was out.

The second salmon took right in the tail of the pool where the water starts to speed up as it goes over the lip. I walked him up the pool once and then he just went for it. I could do no more than let him go so I began making my way over the rocks as calmly and as carefully as anyone with a screaming reel can. Just as I thought he was never going to stop, he did, and I took a welcome breather. A glance at my reel showed that I was well into the orange backing. So now it was a question of moving downstream, retrieving line as I went, but because I no longer had a free hand to grab for support, the walk became more of a stumble. About 250 metres down the Gauntlet, there is a brook that joins the river and luckily it was low enough for me to wade across. The fish had stopped in a deep hole where the brook comes in so I made my way below him, still retrieving line. Then I took a deep breath and tightened up, firmly but gently.

> "I took a deep breath and tightened up, firmly but gently"

To my great relief he was still on, but it was a nerve-racking tussle because I could no longer go anywhere except back up the Gauntlet — unlike the salmon, which had the option of heading back to sea. Eventually I managed to land him — a bright-silver 24-pounder, covered in sea-lice.

The next few days produced some memorable battles with more big fish — I managed to land six over 20 lb — but there was nothing to compare with the experience of running down the Gauntlet.

■ *Salmon of a Lifetime*, an excellent new video about fishing the Gaula, is available price £29 (inc p+p) from Manfred Raguse, Robert-Blum-Str 5 B, 22453 Hamburg, Germany. Make cheques payable to M. Raguse.

Filmed over two years, the video follows Bernard Cribbins's quest for a Gaula salmon and features, among other excitements, Japanese angler Ken Sawada catching a 40-pounder, despite his companion's nerve-racking attempts to mis-net it!

Highly recommended – Ed.