

A large, vibrant yellow title "AN ICELANDIC SAGA" is superimposed over a photograph of a man fly fishing. The man, wearing a dark green beanie and a black jacket, is smiling and holding a massive, multi-colored Atlantic salmon (pink, orange, and yellow) by its tail. He is standing in a turbulent, rocky river. In the background, there are green hills and a small wooden building. The title is in a bold, distressed font.

AN ICELANDIC SAGA

YOSHI AOKI WITH A LARGE ICELANDIC ATLANTIC

Anyone who has ever chased Atlantic salmon with a fly knows they can be next to impossible to catch.

We've all heard the accounts of those who've spent countless hours on some of the world's most famous salmon rivers, only to come home without ever raising a fish. Their fickleness in taking a fly is legendary.

However, this is not the case in Iceland!



My brother, Yoshi, and I first met Rafn Valur Alfredsson (Rabbi), the leaseholder to the Midfjardara River, in March 2009 at the Toronto Sportsman's Show. The stories he told of thousands of Atlantics eager to take a dry fly sounded too good to be true. Then he showed us the pictures. From that point on, we had one goal in mind—to fish salmon on the Midfjardara that summer! It didn't take us long to arrange the trip.

Finally, after months of anticipation, departure day arrived! Yoshi and I flew out of Toronto to Reykjavikmet, where we met up with Tim Myers and April Vokey of Fly Max Films at the airport. Rabbi was waiting for us, and we began the breathtaking, three-hour drive through the mountains to his lodge on the Midfjardara River.

Still not quite believing what he had promised back in the spring, we fired question after question at him about what we could expect. I'm sure he felt rather relieved when we eventually arrived at our destination. The

lodge was nestled beside the river in a deep, wide valley. It was simple, yet stylish, with a wood-panelled interior, leather furniture, and huge panoramic windows looking out across the valley.

Normally, as soon as we arrived I would have flown out of the vehicle with my waders on and fly rod in hand before my feet even hit the ground. However, on the Midfjardara, the day is broken into two sessions, the first from 7a.m.-1p.m. and the second from 4p.m.-10p.m. The three hours in between were scheduled for lunch and napping. How on earth was I

supposed to nap when there were Atlantics only a few hundred feet away? No napping for me! Instead, with my camera by my side, I explored the beautiful countryside, trying my very best not to check the time every couple of minutes. When 4p.m. finally rolled around, our anticipation and excitement were hard to contain.

Unlearning

I was the one chosen to cast first and I wasn't about to argue. We strolled down to a long, wide pool enclosed in a deep canyon.

I've been on a lot of great fishing trips, but I can't say enough

Rabbi explained where to cast, how to work the fly, and what to do when a fish took.

Barely were the words out of his mouth when a fish came flying up at my skating hitch tube. Everything Rabbi had just told me went flying out the window, and I set the hook with the gusto of a true trout fisherman. By sheer luck, I was able to hook the fish, but lost it shortly thereafter. Having spent my whole life setting the hook on fish on the take, how was I supposed to stand motionless instead? When I felt the line slack, I despaired. But Rabbi just chuckled, and reassured me, there would be more.

He was right, as there were more fish willing to take that evening—yet old habits die hard. Time and time again, I set the hook too quickly and too savagely.

Rabbi explained once more, "Their mouths are soft and they hit with such force, you're ripping the fly right out of their mouths."

I repeated this advice over and over in my head as I continued to skate the small, bright-blue hitch tube across the current. When the next fish took, I managed to get it right: like a seasoned salmon fisherman, I stood there motionless and, finally, I hooked up. It was by no means a giant, but the power it had was breathtaking. Time after time, I was sure I was about to land it, but each time it turned and screamed out line. But I hung in there and, as I led the fish to hand, I felt a huge sense of accomplishment. I had my first Atlantic! After a few pictures, I kissed it and let it go!

That night we sat around the dinner table, eating incredible food and swapping tales

of the day's events. Life couldn't have been better!

An Unexpected Catch

The following morning, we all caught salmon. Then I hooked a fish which felt a little different. I saw a flash of red, and my heart started pounding. This was no salmon! As I watched Yoshi land it, I just stood staring—it was my first Arctic char. This alone was worth the trip to Iceland.

Now that we knew there were char in the river, that's all Yoshi and I focused on. Rabbi and everyone else at the lodge thought we were crazy. Here we were on one of the greatest salmon rivers in the world, and we wanted to catch char! Through the following days, I managed to land a few more, and

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APRIL VOKEY WITH A FINE SALMON



GETTING THERE

about the atmosphere Rabbi and his staff create!

April lost one at her feet, but Yoshi still hadn't had a sniff from one! On one occasion, he hooked up on a fish, which he fought briefly, then turned to us with a slightly disappointed look. "It's just a salmon", he pouted. We all burst out with laughter, realizing how crazy that sounded!

Although the char continued to elude Yoshi, the salmon fishing was superb. In one evening, Yoshi and I landed 30 fish in one pool in under three hours.

"A lot of people fish a week without raising three fish... I just raised three on one cast", Yoshi reflected. Again we couldn't stop laughing! I've been on a lot of great fishing trips, but I can't say enough about the atmosphere Rabbi and his staff create! I'm sure I've never laughed so hard as I did that week.

An Embarrassing Moment

One evening we stood on top of a rock cliff, overlooking a pool with 30 or so salmon in it. April started stripping out line, took a few false casts, and watched her fly slowly float down to the water. As soon as it touched, the water exploded.

Hooking the salmon was the easy part. She had to find her way down the steep banks while trying to keep tension on the fish. But with supportive and helpful advice from her audience above, she found her way to the river's edge and landed her fish.

Seeing how easy she made it look, I thought I should follow suit and show her how it really should be done! After missing three fish, breaking off a fly on the ledge below me, and almost falling in, I decided



YOSHI WITH YET ANOTHER SALMON



WORKING A RUN ON THE "MIDI"

GETTING THERE:

The Midfjardara River is also known in Iceland as "The Queen of the Rivers", with over 200 named, gin-clear pools! To find out more about how to fish the Midfjardara, please visit: Fishing & Hunting Destinations www.fhd.is or email at: info@fhdestinations.com



EAT YOUR HEART OUT YOSHI!



THE QUEEN OF THE RIVERS

260 iceland

Yet there we were, on one of the world's greatest salmon rivers in



there was no reason for me to show her up. I walked back to the vehicle with my tail between my legs, and with everyone laughing. But, even though it was at my expense, it was hilarious.

The Elusive Big One

Towards the end of the trip, we had accomplished almost everything we could possibly hope for, with one exception. Although we had caught an unbelievable number of fish, we still had not hooked into a really big one. But we weren't to be disappointed.

Yoshi located a large fish holding in the tailout of a deep pool. For cast after cast, the fish showed absolutely no interest in his fly. Then, suddenly, it shot up and crushed his fly on the surface.

But there was a problem: downstream from the pool was a huge stretch of rapids! Yoshi managed to keep the fish close for a while, until eventually it had had enough and charged downstream. Ignoring the danger, we chased it, running and jumping over jagged rock, praying the hook would hold.

I had it in my grasp twice, but couldn't hang on! By then, we were more than 200 yards downstream and the fish still showed no sign of stopping. In one last, desperate effort, I stretched out and grabbed hold of the tail. The fish gods must have been with us, for I managed to hang on. Finally, and against huge odds, we had our big fish—a hen. And that was just the start of things to come.

By evening we had landed three more big Atlantics, all on surface flies. Two of them

AIR TRAVEL:

Iceland Air currently offers a direct flight from Toronto to Reykjavik in under 6 hours! Visit www.icelandair.ca for more information and details!



MIDFJARDARA RIVER LODGE

KISS BEFORE RELEASE



GEARING UP



one of the most beautiful countries of the world.

were hens and the other was a big male with a huge kype and gorgeous colouring. I can't remember being as nervous as I was during that fight.

After releasing it, Yoshi and I relaxed on the bank. I was absolutely satisfied, feeling that it really didn't matter whether or not I caught another fish. But Yoshi had a very different look on his face, which shouted, "I need to catch a char".

Yoshi's Big Moment

Our last morning was spent entirely on the char pool. I caught another couple of char, but Yoshi continued to hook just salmon. It was obvious he could feel time running out and the pressure was building. To make matters worse, while standing right beside him, I

landed the most gorgeous, vividly-coloured char of the trip.

At this point, I was really beginning to feel guilty. Just one char, that's all Yoshi needed. Then, in perfect keeping with that exhilarating trip, it happened. With almost no time left, Yoshi finally caught his char. I've never seen anyone so excited and so relieved at the same time.

We took photos, quickly released it, then stood back to look around and soak everything in. It was hard to believe that only a few months earlier, Iceland had been no more than a dream. Yet there we were, on one of the world's greatest salmon rivers in one of the most beautiful countries of the world. I cannot wait for the day when I get to walk the banks of the Midfjardara once more! ≈



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