A fly fisherman is wading in a river, holding a fishing net. The water is clear and greenish-brown. The fisherman is wearing a blue and white plaid shirt, a dark vest, and a baseball cap. A fishing rod is visible in the upper right corner. The background shows lush green trees and foliage.

GEORGIA

THE FLY GUYS

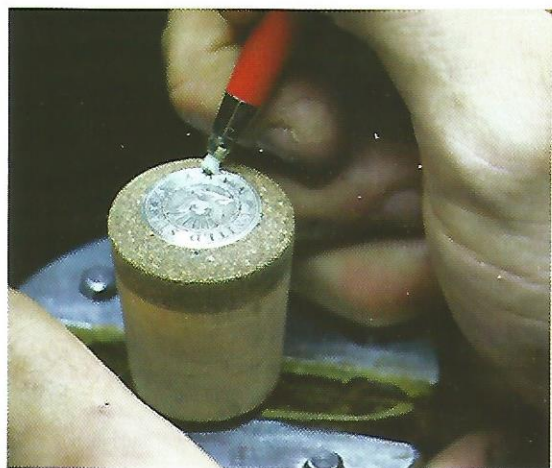
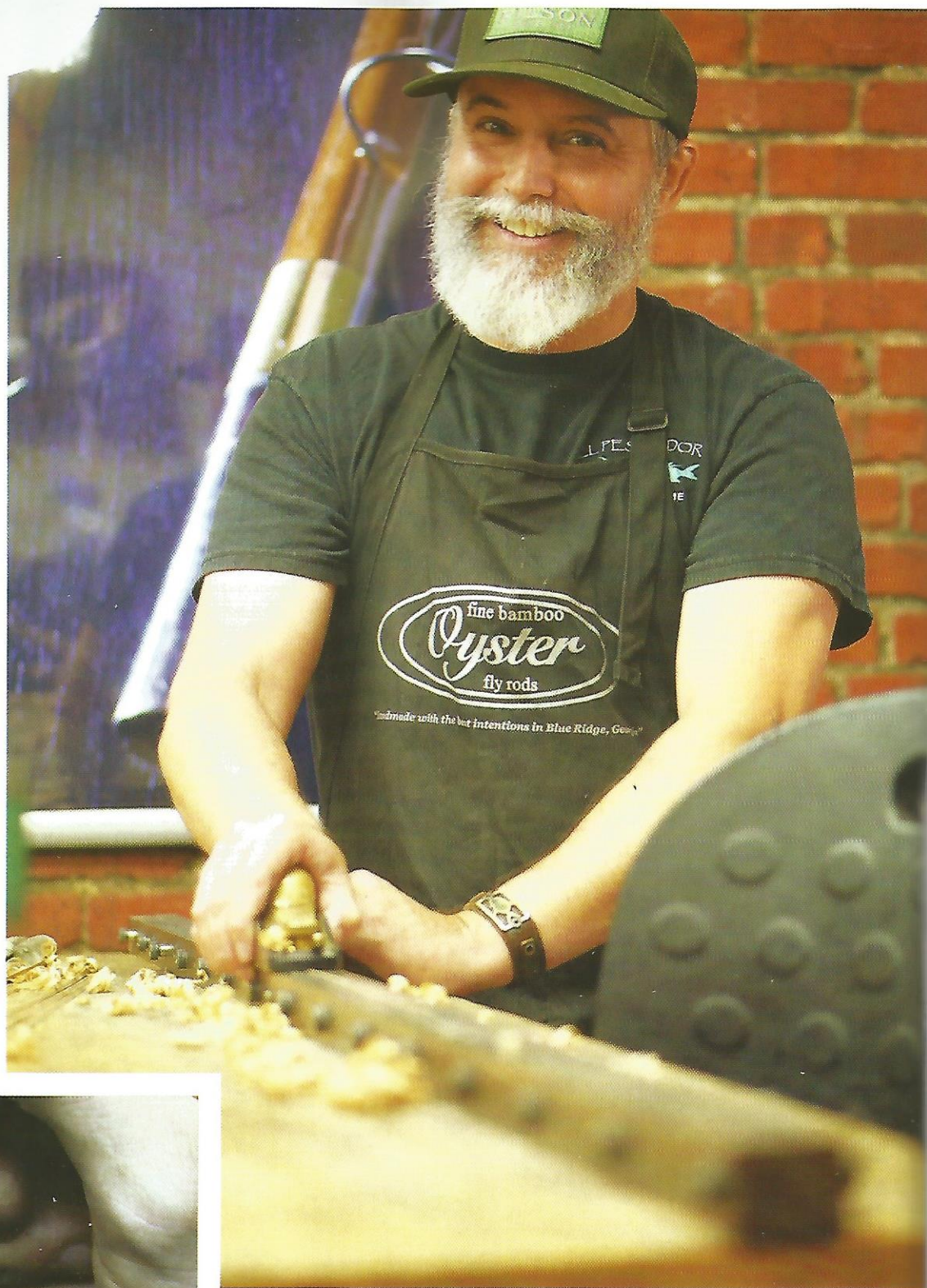
Text and Photography: Luke Swab



DRINK IT HOW

"BET YOU I'VE CAUGHT
MORE FISH IN MY LIFE
THAN YOU HAVE."

THESE ARE THE WORDS
I STUPIDLY BLURT OUT
MY FIRST TIME
MEETING THE ONE AND
ONLY BILL OYSTER,
CONSIDERED BY MANY
TO BE THE BEST
BAMBOO FLY-ROD
MAKER IN THE WORLD.
SAD THING IS, IT'S
PROBABLY TRUE.



The Man, The Legend, Bill Oyster shaving
some Bamboo down to the perfect thickness
for some lucky soul.

All of the hand engraving on each rod is
done by Bill Oyster himself and can be
personalized to say exactly what you want.

For the last 15 years I've run a commercial salmon fishing business in Alaska, and each season I catch more than 100,000 pounds of Sockeye. I capture them with nets by the hundreds, some days by the thousands. No releasing, no measuring. Each fish gets tossed like a Frisbee into the hold with no special attention or second thought.

To compare what I do every day for a living in the summer with the exquisite delicacy of fly fishing is like a McDonald's fry boy talking shop with Gordon Ramsey—a little insulting, to say the least. Now here I am, standing outside of Bill Oyster's shop in the fly fishing capital of Blue Ridge, GA, receiving a personal lesson from the Sensei himself, and I stick my foot in my mouth.

My comment was intended as a joke, but without the context of my day job it comes off as arrogant. That's the last thing I want to convey. But the truth is, sport fishing has never really appealed to me. It's not because I enjoy commercial fishing more—I don't, as the people closest to me know—I just get bored easily. I knew coming down here it was going to challenge my attention span. Now, I'm beginning to wonder if this whole trip is a mistake.

THE PLAN

The idea started when my longtime riding buddy, Cameron, proposed mixing things up for our annual spring adventure. Cameron doesn't fish—commercial or sport—but his good friend Kyle Jones has a passion for fly fishing and an appreciation for motorcycles, so we convinced him to join us as the only halfway-experienced member of our group.

I also invited my best friend, Nick Rader, with whom I share a riding history that feels as old as the Blue Ridge Mountains themselves but actually began in high school. It started when he and I discovered we both owned matching Kawasaki KLX300Rs, and grew steadily from there until 2011, when we spent five months riding motorcycles together through Africa. I called him up, and he agreed without hesitation.

With Nick onboard, our crew was looking solid on the motorcycle end, but we were going to need professional help if we had any hope of catching fish. So, after searching online for reputable companies, we found Hunter Morris of Fly Fishing North Georgia. We booked a fishing tour through them, and they reached

out to our local shop, Lookout Fly Anglers, to help give us a more personal experience. Something in our transaction must have revealed how clueless we were, because the company owner himself, Chris Loizeaux, showed up the morning we were scheduled to leave Chattanooga. He arrived in a chase vehicle filled with all of the supplies we would need for the week—mostly food and beer—and after a short round of introductions, our five-piece caravan set out for Georgia.

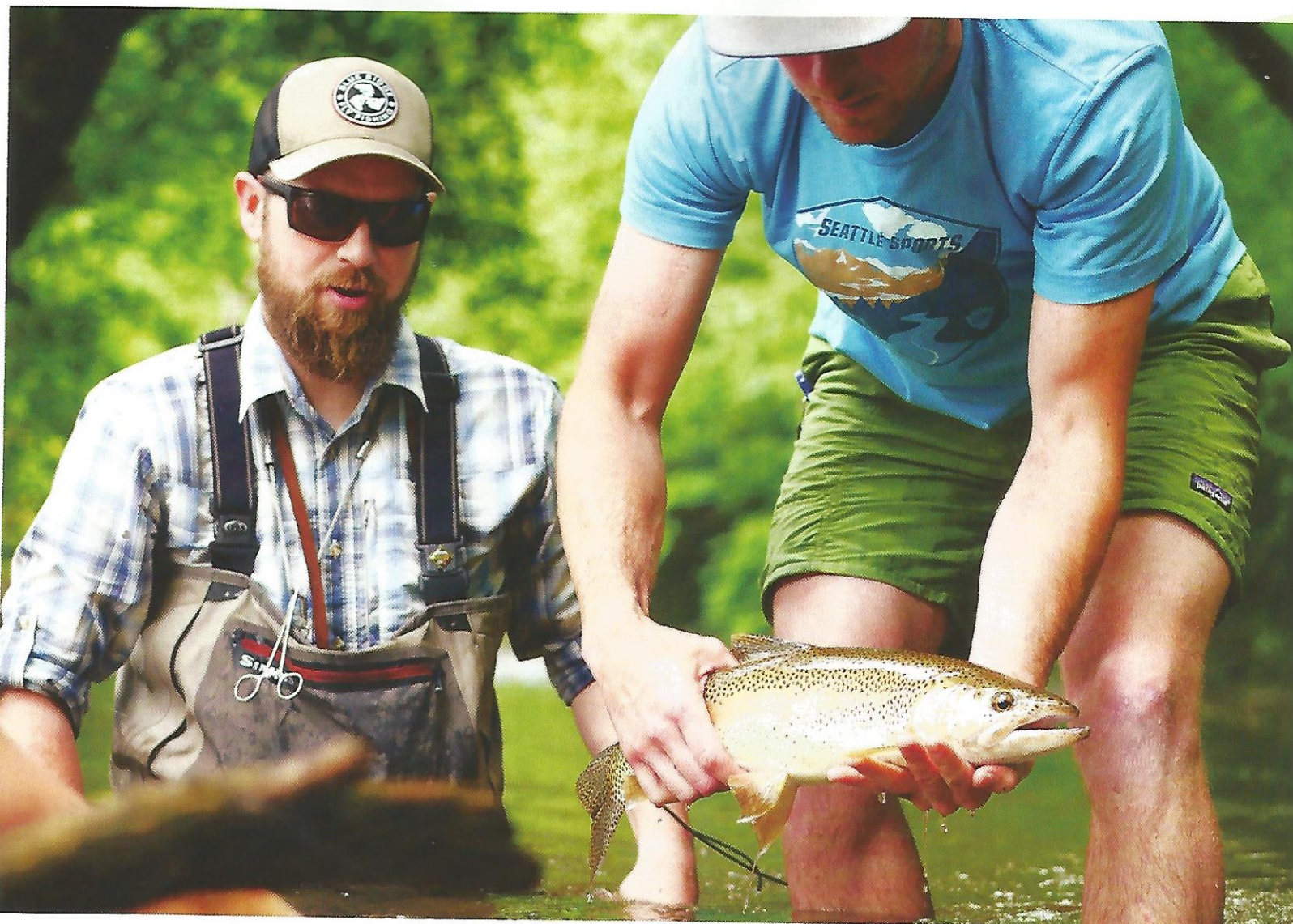
BASE CAMP

Our lodging for the week is a log cabin just outside the town of Blue Ridge, on the bank of the Noon-tootla Creek. It is a large A-frame structure, with bedrooms in the loft and basement, and a huge covered deck facing the water. Inside, the main-floor living room is decorated like a Cracker Barrel—a perfect theme for the home-style meals we'll take turns cooking throughout our stay.

The cabin will serve as our home base for the week, from which we'll take day-trips to local fishing holes that are best accessed by motorcycle. Cameron and I are on Triumph Tigers, 800 and 1200, and Nick and Kyle are riding the Suzuki V-Strom 650 and 1000 XT models. These dual sport bikes are the perfect vehicles for exploring the hundreds of miles of forest roads that give access to this area's lesser-known fishing

The Triumph Tiger and Suzuki V-Strom were more than capable of forging through a flooded highway in Cleveland, TN. Cars and trucks had to just look on, stopped in their tracks.





At one of the better fishing holes we found during this trip, guide Chris Loizeaux eyes Kyle Jones' first, of what would be many, fish to come throughout the day.

Fly Fishing is all about fun, and sometimes that means pretending to pump up the fake tire on this old school-bus during a lunch break near the Ocoee River.



spots. But so far our only experience on them has been the half-day ride from Tennessee, past the Ocoee River and the unfamiliar towns of Ducktown and McCaysville. Too eager to even stop at probably the only “Drug and Gun” store in America, we followed the winding two-lane mountain roads toward the racing cold waters where the monsters abide.

In the week to come, we will be thankful for the Tigers and V-Stroms as they performed flawlessly in the challenging terrain of the seasonal mountain roads. Rocks, mud, and lots of rain are not ideal for motorcycles, but these bikes took it all in stride. And with no worries about the bikes, we were free to focus on the spectacular mountain scenery.

Living on the other side of the Smokies, we’re familiar with the incredible riding the whole region has to offer. Countless roads twist and turn through the dense deciduous trees, and since we’re riding big dual sports the occasional dirt road beckons to be explored. The soft rolling hills are cut through by the many roads, some dead ends, some not, but each road leads us past natural beauty.

GEARING UP

Our first morning in the cabin, we wake up early to cook breakfast and prepare for the day of fishing ahead. Once the table is cleared, Chris and Hunter begin setting out the gear we’ll take with us on the deck of the cabin. I’m shocked by how much equipment is involved! The deck is covered with sets of specially designed boots and dry-suits, hats, vests, and sunglasses with polarized lenses. And that’s not even including our fishing rod and boxes of hand-tied flies.

It takes the four of us a long time to organize it all and get ready. In a way, it’s like gearing up before a motorcycle ride: there’s a lot more to it than you would guess—especially someone who’s never done it before.

Finally, with everyone geared up and looking the part, Hunter gives us a basic run-down of how to cast, and when and why a fish will bite. Basically, the goal is to present the fly on the end of your line in the most natural-looking way, so any fish that sees it will be convinced that it’s real, and bite. Your choice of fly is based on several factors. What natural flies are fish in the area already eating? Is it cloudy or sunny

The perfect sweeping roads throughout the Chattahoochee National Forest make for a fantastic ride to any of the fishing holes to try for the day.





The high elevation combined with all the mountain runoff creates the cold creeks that the fish love, which brings people here from all over America.

outside? Is the water clear or muddy? In the same way that motorcyclists decide how to dress and what to pack for a ride in order to be safe and prepared, the fisherman makes dozens of choices to ensure a successful day of fishing.

This morning, Chris and Hunter plan on taking us to a private stretch of Noontootla Creek. Few people ever visit this section, we're told, and those that do practice catch-and-release. This builds the stock and individual fish size, so everyone who comes here has a higher chance of landing a fish. Which is good, because our group is going to need every advantage it can get.

KEEP CASTING

Kyle is the first to catch a fish—not surprising, since he is the only one of us with a fly fishing background. He already possesses the special touch that Hunter and Chris are patiently attempting to pass on to the rest of us. A few minutes later, Kyle lands another. Nick and Cameron start getting hits as well. I'm the only one who has yet to even cast his line in the water; I'm too distracted by the natural beauty surrounding us. The early morning fog has lifted, revealing the creek's crystal clear water. I scramble over the rocks, camera looped over my neck, shooting photos of everything. The lighting is perfect, and I want to capture everything I can.

Suddenly, Nick hooks a fish: his first ever on a fly rod. Chris jumps quickly into action and talks him through landing the fish. Nick reels it in close, then scoops it perfectly into the net. I snap photos of him cradling the nice-sized brook trout in both hands before he releases it back into the water.

Soon after that, Cameron catches his first, and it's my turn to put down my camera and finally try landing one myself. I wade to the edge of a deep run and start casting in a manner that is nowhere close to the way Chris has instructed me. I'm struggling to land my fly anywhere close to where I am aiming, and it's at this moment that I remember the line I gave Bill Oyster yesterday, bragging about the thousands of fish I've caught in my lifetime.

Minutes pass, and still I have not caught a fish. Something else is happening though, that I wasn't expecting at first: I'm starting to relax. I'm realizing it's not really about catching anything. It's more about simply being here, away from everyday reality. I'm starting to understand why fly fishermen love doing this so much, and to see how life's conflicts are somehow paused when you are standing in the creek.

The Zen-like feeling I get while riding is quite similar to that of fly fishing. The only difference: standing



Nick Rader slipping on some waders after a filling breakfast and before his first cast of the day.

Kyle Jones proudly holding up his first ever homemade fly during our "Fly Class" that Chris Loizeaux gave us one evening.

Crossing the beautiful but slippery wooden bridge over the Toccoa River.





This private section of the Noontootla Creek plays an important role for us in landing the biggest fish of the trip. Private waters are important and often home to the “donkeys” due to the limited access and protection that it provides for the fish.

in a creek I don’t have to worry about traffic. At least I hope not. The laid-back attitude of the people and land here is one of the reasons I call this part of the country home, but also a reason it’s one of my favorite places to explore on a motorcycle.

Realizing this makes me determined, not so much to actually catch a fish, but to open myself completely to this experience and give recreational fishing an honest try. I miss what feels like thousands of hits before I finally manage to set the hook at the right instant. After a full hour of patiently casting, it is a rush to feel the fish tugging the end of my line. I have to move my position to prevent it from swimming toward logs that could break the line, but I handle it like a pro—at least, that’s what Chris tells me. I reel the fish in, and when I finally hold it in my hands above the water, I have mixed feelings. We’re not going to eat this fish. In fact, we aren’t going to eat any fish we catch today. As a commercial fisherman, I’m struggling to understand the point of releasing this trout that I have spent the past hour trying to catch.

But then, maybe that’s the point, too. We aren’t fishing for food. The true reason we’re here is to share the experience of fishing together. Looking around at my friends, gathered to watch me land my first catch with a fly rod, I realize that fishing is just an excuse for us to be together. Just like all of the motorcycle trips we’ve taken over the years, even Nick’s and my trip through Africa. The bikes are just the tools; the real point is each other.

With this in mind, I unhook my fish and place it gently back into the water. I wade back to shore full of excitement—about landing a fish, disconnecting from the world, and just being present with my friends, fishing creeks throughout the Chattahoochee National Forest. As a bonus, we get to do it all on motorcycles. I know that of the thousands of fish I have caught, this one from Noontootla Creek will be the one that I remember the most. **RR**

GEORGIA AND NORTH CAROLINA

APPROXIMATELY 281 MILES



Always consult more-detailed maps for touring purposes. For map legend, see page 129.

OVERVIEW

This part of Georgia is home to dozens of small mountain towns, each charming in its own way, each equipped to accommodate visitors' basic needs. Centrally located and known as the "Fly Fishing Capital of Georgia," the town of Blue Ridge is an ideal home base for motorcyclists and anglers. Fishing is permitted year round, but the best times are during the spring and fall, when trout undergo transitional feeding periods and are most likely to bite. Visitors should expect greater chances of rain in the spring, but be prepared for all types of weather regardless of the season: the Southern Appalachians are known for pop-up showers and sudden temperature shifts, and can prove miserable without proper clothing.

ROADS & BIKING

Located at the southern base of Appalachian Mountains, this area is a goldmine for riders who love steep hills, sharp curves, and scenic stretches of winding two-lane road. Many of the best fishing holes, however, are only accessible via unpaved dirt-and-gravel Forest Service roads. In these cases, the best option is a dual sport or adventure style motorcycle

with aggressive dirt tires. This is an advanced-level riding trip that requires both the proper equipment and experience in off-road conditions.

RESOURCES

- Fly Fishing North Georgia
www.flyfishingnorthgeorgia.com
- Lookout Fly Anglers
www.lookoutflyanglers.com
- Oyster Fly Rods
www.oysterbamboo.com
- Blue Ridge, GA, www.cityofblueridgega.gov

MOTORCYCLE & GEAR

2018 Suzuki V-Strom 650 XT, V-Strom 1000 XT

2018 Triumph Tiger 800 XC and 1200 XC

Helmet: Klim TK1200, HJC RPHA 70 ST

Jacket: Fox Racing Titan Sport, REV' IT! Pacific 2 H20,

Pants: Moose Racing w/pockets, Draggin Jeans

Boots: BMW Santiago, REV' IT! Taylor

Gloves: Warm-n-Safe Ultimate Touring Heated, Indian Deerskin