A "Grand Slam" week of fishing on the banks of Alaska’s Goodnews River is a fisherman’s dream, says Jonathan Young.
shackled with school fees and mortgages the chance to experience rod-wrenching days at comparatively low cost, especially if they travel to Goodnews River Lodge in Southwest Alaska. Set on the banks of the Goodnews River, flowing out of the Ahklun Mountains into the Bering Sea, a “Grand Slam” week in late July, when it’s possible to catch king, chum, pink, sockeye and coho salmon, as well as rainbow trout, Dolph Varden (a sea-going char), Arctic char and grayling, costs $8,950. Anyone under 16 accompanied by an adult enjoys a half pint of scrumpy in the back parlour. A whole week without a drink? Unthinkable. But also, inevitable.

We waited for the plane, eyeing up our fellow passengers’ hand luggage that we suspected carried liquid supplies. When she arrived, she was a beauty, a Super DC-3, Number N30TN, that had originally entered service with the United States Air Force on 10 January 1941 and had then had a lively life, twice being seized for drug running by the US Drug Enforcement Agency and used as a crop sprayer before being sold to TransNorthern Aviation in 2003. Stretching luxuriously in the sparse seating, we watched Alaska’s mountains and glaciers roll by until a feather-light landing in Goodnews Bay village, followed by a brisk boat trip upriver to Goodnews Lodge.

We were shown to our digs for the week, a homely hut akin to a posh polytunnel fitted with an industrial-looking heater. After a brief lunch of salmon and a glug of coffee, we set off for an afternoon’s fishing.

At Goodnews you’re issued daily with a different rod so there’s the chance to learn something new each day. This also avoids the personality clashes that occasionally occur (I shall never forget the ordeal of being stuck for a week with “Pedrito the Bastard” on another expedition). Our guide for the afternoon was Jan Stewart, a local man from the Yup’ik people who own the land. We climbed into his boat, moored 60 yards from our hut. “Hope you’re ready for a long boat ride,” he warned, running up the big outboard before cutting the engine 90 seconds later and landing us 250 yards from the camp. He almost smiled and we decided we liked Stewart a lot; he had our sense of humour.

He steered Fergus to a junction pool 30 yards into the river and within a minute his 9-wt rod was bowed by something strong, one of the six chum he caught in the next two hours, together with a pink. Most of the fish were fresh, the camp being a short run from the sea, and I could hardly concentrate on my own fishing for the sound of suppressed yells and Stewart’s tramp out to net another fish. “Still not connected, Dad!” came the boy’s “encouraging” cry as I questioned the wisdom of bringing him and the lack of gin-and-tonic ennobles the human spirit” by returning people to the simple joys of fishing they once experienced before being submersed by the cares of modern life.

But this is why I’d brought the boy out here. Up to now his fishing was limited to stocked trout and the odd pollock and wrasse. I wanted him to learn not only how to cast properly but also how to play salmon, something that’s not learnt easily or quickly nowadays on Scottish fish. Finally, I connected with a sockeye, which turned out to be haul hooked and, as Stewart told me with a grin, “doesn’t count”. We returned to the Lodge for a shower, supper and our briefing by the camp’s owner, Mike Gorton. Like the rest of his team, Gorton isn’t merely keen on fishing, it’s a religion that pulls American outdoorsmen to a near-monastic existence in the country’s wild places.

He started guiding in Alaska in 1987 before working at the Goodnews River Lodge for seven years, eventually buying it with the help of a friend in 1996. His evangelical creed is “to revive and rekindle the faith that predominates. ...
around 4½-6lb, they have a two-year lifestyle with most of the fish returning in even-numbered years, such as 2016. Absorbing these facts, Fergus and I meet the other guests, who included New York lawyer Gregg Rubin and his son, Winick, and the extended Haaker family, who have a thriving business selling street sweepers and sewage trucks in California. Like us, they could barely wait to finish supper before checking another line in the river outside the Lodge.

Mornings start early at Goodnews, with a 7am cooked breakfast. Having packed your “ples” for the day, it’s then on to the boats at 8am, with the option of returning to camp for a hot bowl of soup at lunchtime.

Our guide on the first full day was Will Schmitt, who taught Fergus to double-haul cast and water-load the line successfully, both essential skills for this type of fishing. All the guides were patient instructors who took time to show a relative novice the finer techniques; this alone was worth the trip.

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