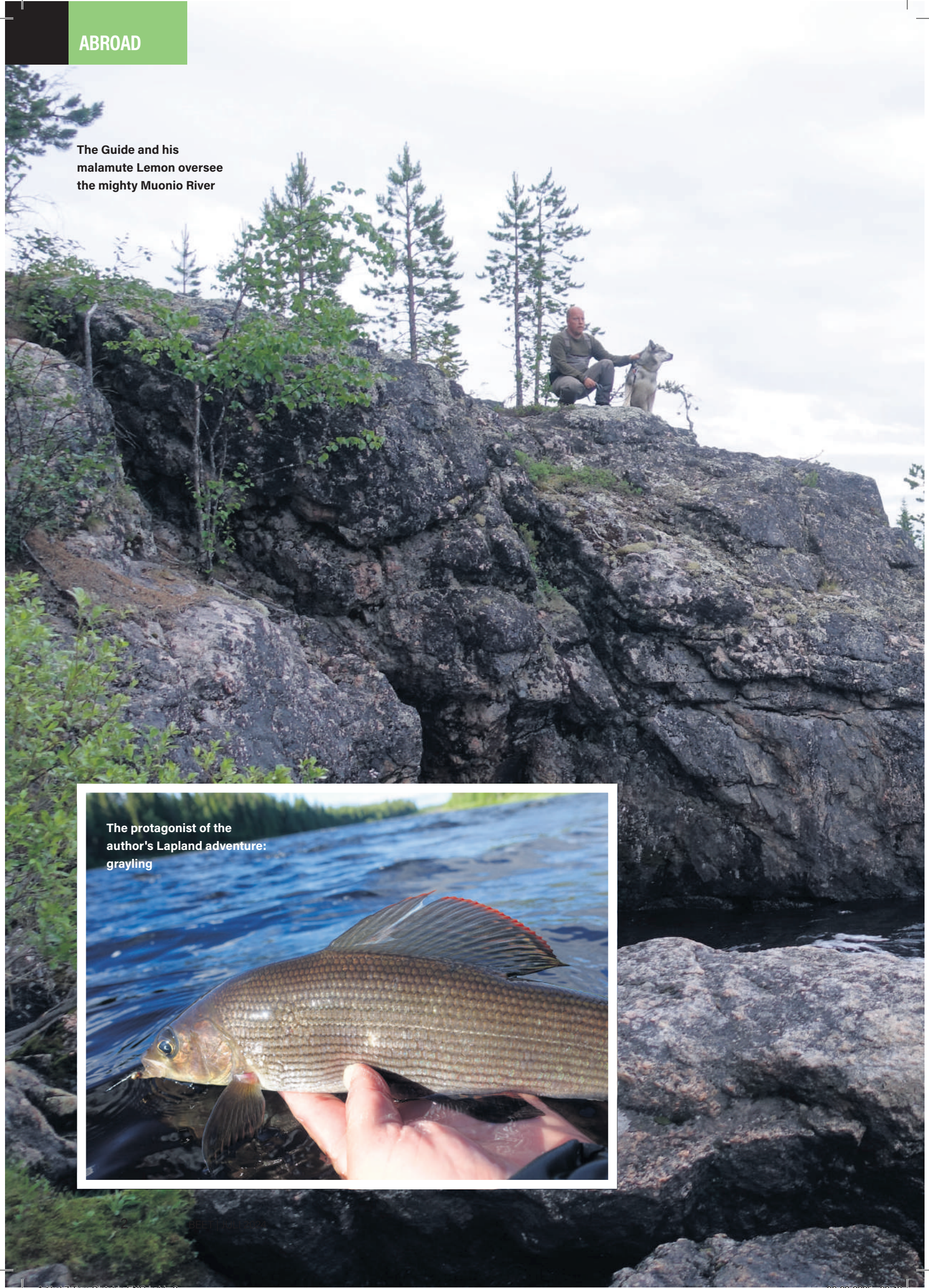


The Guide and his malamute Lemon oversee the mighty Muonio River



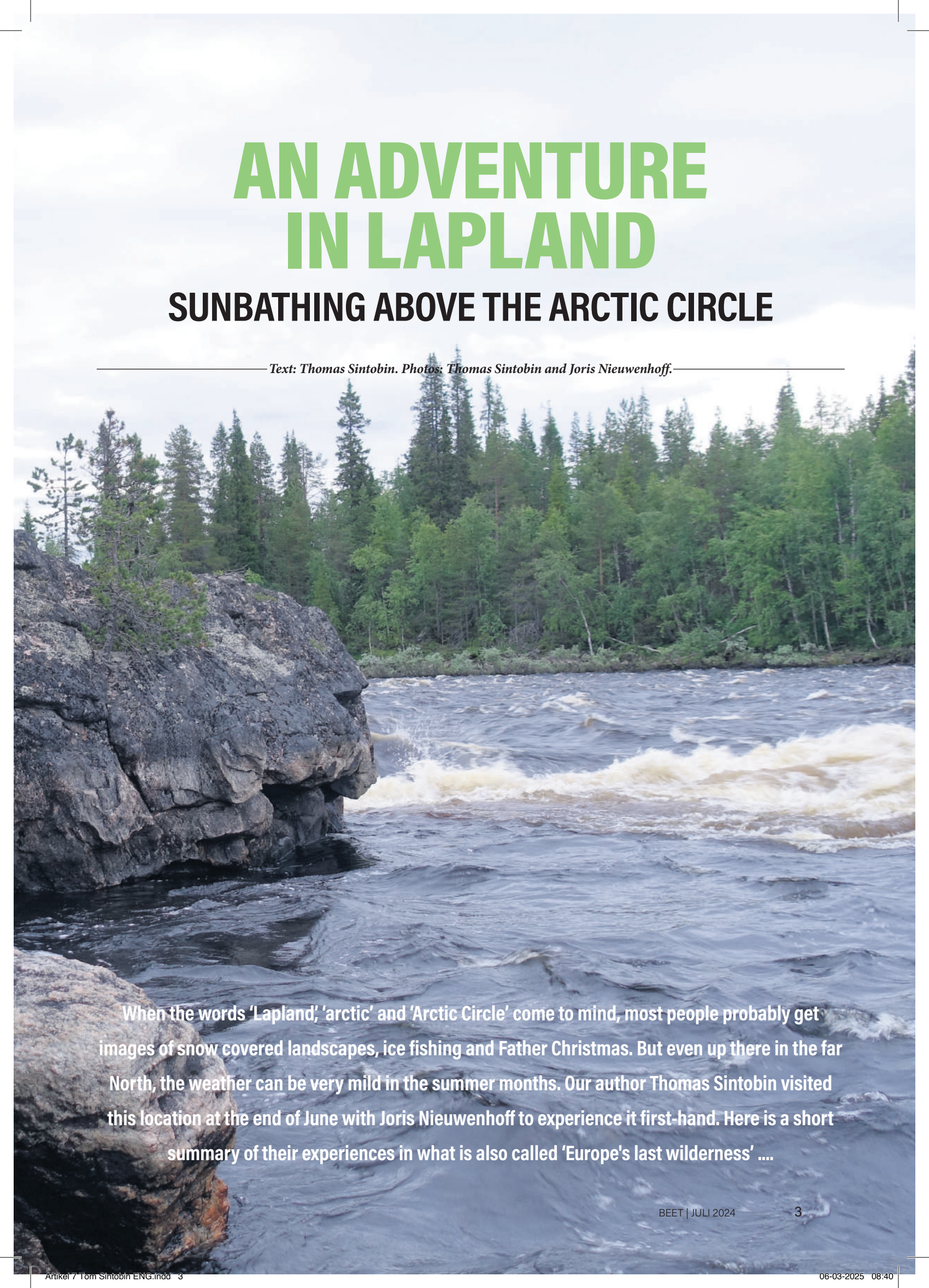
The protagonist of the author's Lapland adventure: grayling



AN ADVENTURE IN LAPLAND

SUNBATHING ABOVE THE ARCTIC CIRCLE

Text: Thomas Sintobin. Photos: Thomas Sintobin and Joris Nieuwenhoff.



When the words 'Lapland,' 'arctic' and 'Arctic Circle' come to mind, most people probably get images of snow covered landscapes, ice fishing and Father Christmas. But even up there in the far North, the weather can be very mild in the summer months. Our author Thomas Sintobin visited this location at the end of June with Joris Nieuwenhoff to experience it first-hand. Here is a short summary of their experiences in what is also called 'Europe's last wilderness'

At Schiphol Airport, we narrowly escaped disaster. We were on our way to the gate when suddenly an alarm sounded and an announcement was made, 'Attention. You must leave this building via the designated emergency exits. Do not use elevators.' We pretended to think that that emergency exit was at the end of the hall way and kept on walking until we reached our gate. For at least 45 minutes we kept waiting there, while the alarm message kept ringing in five languages, and then suddenly they let us on the plane anyway and we were able to leave. Hours later we read on the online news sites that it was a malfunctioning fire alarm. But by then we were already on an island in the middle of the Muonio River, on the border between Sweden and Finland, with a steaming plate of moose goulash in front of us. Other travellers at Schiphol were less lucky and missed connections, holidays and travel fun.

That plate of moose-goulash was probably the tastiest meal I had ever eaten. The same was true of



A cup of river water tea always goes down well

all the other meals we had every night at the lodge: from the local whitefish to reindeer, and smoked salmon to salted brook trout, not to mention the sausages we impaled on a branch at the water's edge a few times and roasted over a birch fire: it all tasted delicious. I don't quite know how to put it into words, but everything seemed so much more intense, real, honest. An old fishing friend had already told me a few times about a wooden log cabin in the middle of nowhere where he wanted to go, and only now did I feel like I was starting to get it.

REINDEER COUNTRY

Lapland is also called Northern Sámi Sápmi, after the name of the Sámi people who live there. It stretches across the northern part of four countries: Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. It is a place of extremes. In winter, it can become crazy cold, even colder than -40 degrees Celsius, and it remains virtually dark for 24 hours, except for the mysterious Northern Lights. In summer, the sun never sets; this phenomenon is very appropriately called the 'midnight sun'. The temperature difference between summer and winter can easily reach 60 degrees! The Sámi are considered Europe's only 'indigenous' tribe, which points to the fact that they have always lived there, since prehistoric times. We went salmon fishing from the boat for a day with Marco, and he is an original Sámi. He was a cheerful and proud man, who loved to tell about the one time he had left his country to go to a wedding party in the Netherlands. He found it a terrible journey as soon as he set foot in Schiphol Airport: 'people everywhere, and bicycles! Dangerous, you don't hear them!' It was a sentiment endorsed by all the locals we spoke to on the island: in the forest they know their way flawlessly, but in bigger cities they get lost all the time. The entire Sámi culture revolves around reindeer. Not a single wild reindeer can be found throughout Sweden: each one is part of someone's herd, and the bigger the herd is, the more prestige the owner enjoys. When a reindeer is slaughtered, nothing



This is what it looks like in winter... The moss over which we walk is then covered under a metre of snow!



Joris drinks a glass of river water: better not try that in rivers in the middle of Europe!

goes to waste. Our Swedish guide told us that once, at the end of a winter outing, he sat with friends reflecting on all they had done that day. They had ridden on a sledge pulled by reindeer, sat in the hut in the evening on reindeer skins eating reindeer soup, and then they did a game where they had to throw rings around reindeer skulls....

ECOLOGICAL

I was struck by how incredibly ecologically aware the people we came into contact with were. Lars, the owner of the lodge, taught us the recycling rules from the very beginning. There were no less than six different bins, in which we had to sort our waste very precisely. The last bin bore the name 'the rest' but was virtually empty. We were kindly asked to use the sturdy paper bags in which we put our sandwiches more than once. After a picnic, I watched Lars take some moss to clean his hands - something people use as toilet paper on treks in the forest there, by the way. Plastic bottles were forbidden in the lodge and so we were not given any; however, Lars did give us all a wooden mug, with which we could drink the water directly from the river. You read it right: all water that flows is safe to drink... At first, it feels a bit uncomfortable, but soon you will find it the most normal thing in the world to sip from the river you are fishing in. Those who want to, can spend a whole summer here outside

civilisation without starving. From July, blueberries are everywhere; they are the bears' main food source. The rivers are full of fish, which you can roast over a fire you light with birch bark. Take my word for it: this really is a place for people who want a taste of a very different way of life from our hyper-industrialised and overpopulated countries....

ISLAND

The lodge is located in a very small village on an island in the middle of the river Muonio, which forms the border between Sweden and Finland. A time zone runs through

the island, meaning you sometimes get an hour older or younger when you move. The village used to be more populated than it is today - only nine people live there! - but in recent decades, almost all the younger people have moved to areas where there is more work. There used to be a small church on the site of the lodge until 1925, but they took it apart and rebuilt it 20 kilometres away. Some Ikea-engineering if you ask me, but then we are in Sweden for a reason. Across the river is the graveyard: in the old days people thought that ghosts could cross the water to



With the fly rod you can have fantastic adventures there!



These nymphs worked very well! By the way, they are on display on an edible mushroom....

come and haunt it. Another remarkable fact: in 1954, a dam was built at the head of the island, so that the river water only flowed along one side. This was done because people used the river in those days as a means of transporting logs. This type of transport ceased to exist in 1971, but it was not until 1992 that Lars, through clever and persistent lobbying, managed to get the dam taken down again. The day after that happened, an elderly resident came crying to him: for the first time since his childhood, he heard the river flowing in front of his house again. The fish, too, thought it was a good evolution, because within a week they began to reoccupy the new flowing sections... All sorts of fish swim around the island: salmon, grayling, pike, perch, ide, white fish, minnow and burbot. All these animals like fish and insects

ARRIVAL IN HELL

Horror stories circulate about Lapland. For instance, you wouldn't be able to sleep there in summer because of the midnight sun. It is indeed tempting to fish around the clock for 24 hours. But if you control yourself just a little bit and go to bed at a somewhat normal time all works out well. After all, the rooms are darkened with curtains, and if that is still not dark enough, you can use an extra blanket to hang on the rail as an extra curtain. Mosquitoes and other stinging "flyers" are also feared. It is indeed true that they are present "in serious numbers". Especially when there is no wind, they buzz around you in swarms. However, by wearing the right clothes (not too thin t-shirts because they just sting through them) and apply strong insect repellent like Deet, you almost completely solve that problem. In six days, I was stung only five times, and each time on my hand after putting back a fish, which washed away the mosquito repellent... And in a way, you have to be glad there are still so many insects there, because that's why the grayling and other fish get so fat



We also went fishing on a large lake, where the grayling turned out to be a lot bigger on average than on the river. Understandable, as there they don't have to fight the current all the time.

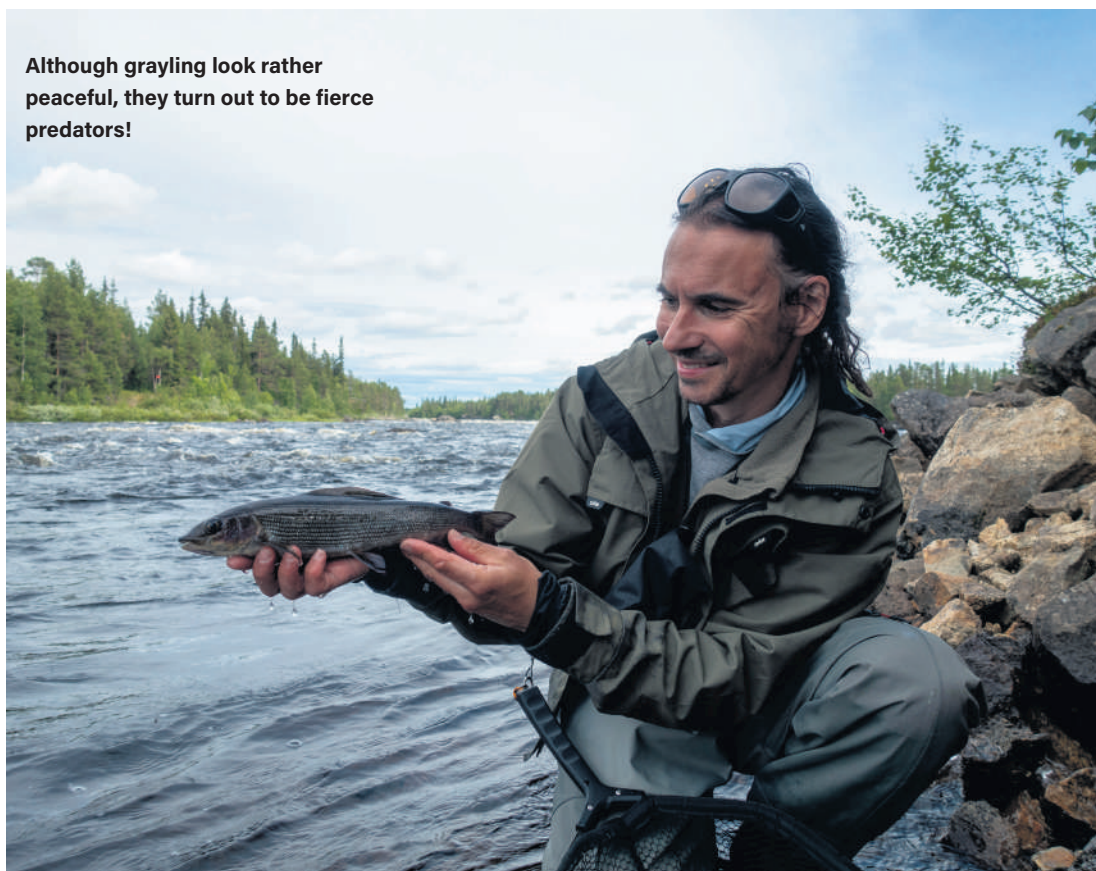
(flying or in larval state) and so they all can be caught on both fly rod and spinning rod. Joris did the latter, I mainly fished with the fly rod.

FISHING

We mostly caught grayling, lots of grayling. However, conditions were not very good: the water level of the river was at least 70 centimetres higher than normal due to exceptional rainfall before our arrival. As a result, we could barely wade for the first few days, which made a lot of good pools in the middle of the Muonio inaccessible. With that high water, the spinning rod had a clear advantage: by making long casts with small crankbaits and spinners, Joris could still reach the deeper spots, and that yielded him not only nice grayling, but also three brown trout. With the fly I was limited to the few pools close to the shore. After a few days, fortunately, the water level had dropped considerably, and I immediately noticed this in the numbers and certainly sizes I was able to catch on the fly rod.

Grayling is a strange fish. I had never caught one before but I was very curious about what they would smell like; ever since I was a kid I had learned that their nickname was "thyme fish," due to the smell of their slime. This turned out to be true, although the smell was

Although grayling look rather peaceful, they turn out to be fierce predators!



not as strong as I had expected. In addition, this species is also called "the lady of the stream," and that too is a good name for these very elegant-looking animals with their beautifully coloured dorsal fins. The smaller specimens swim in schools, the larger ones are said to be solitary. They like to catch dry flies (I fished mainly with barbless Klinkhammers with a green bottom, size 12), but they were also good to

catch with the nymph. Not too small goldhead nymphs proved very successful, both at the bottom and on a side line. The trick was to drift them right into the side of the stream, where it was extremely important to make sure they maintained the same speed as the current. Grayling are a fish you have to track down: the schools seem to change position frequently. For example, one time just before dinner I found a school of fish with an average of 40 centimetres, of which I was able to hook (and land) five in half an hour, and then I had to leave. Of course I rushed back to that spot immediately after my meal, but I didn't get another strike! Then I found another shoal a little further on, unfortunately with some smaller specimens. The biggest grayling we hooked fell for a crankbait that Joris had let swim along a rock in front of his feet. After a spectacular fight, during which the grayling took violent runs and jumped wildly out of the water several times, the fish came loose, right in front of the net. The guide estimated it at 55 centimetres, and maybe even a little bigger... In any case, it was the biggest he had ever seen there.



Joris caught very well with the spinning rod!



A unique crankbait, specially designed for the technique of Harling.



All sizes of pike are around and they are all very intensely coloured.



When, after hours of casting for salmon, you finally get that long-awaited strike, but it's a pike, you may well commit harakiri with your wading stick!

BIG GAME

Besides grayling, Atlantic salmon also inhabit the river Muonio. Catching them, however, is a different story... First of all, there are far fewer salmon migrating up there than there were, say, five years ago. No one knows exactly why; some point to overfishing of herring in the Baltic Sea that prevents the salmon from finding enough food. Others blame it on problems with escaped farmed salmon, and still others think it's just natural cycles. On the Muonio, it is not too bad and this year there are more of them

than last year, fortunately. Anyway, even if the pool is full of salmon, you can't be sure you're going to catch them. As soon as they move up river to spawn far upstream, they stop feeding. The only reason one is occasionally caught is because you happened to move the lure or streamer just in front of its mouth. The fish then takes it in a reflex, not because it is hungry.

'They are defending their stone,' the guide called it... Getting your lure in front of the fish's mouth is not enough: it has to come from the side, and not from behind or in front. So the trick is to cast your lure just on the edge of the main current and let it fan out into the reversing current. Two days of endless casting yielded exactly 0 bites for Joris and myself. We did see several salmon rising and jumping, which gave courage to persevere - but without success unfortunately. The day after our

departure, however, one was caught in "our" pool by a more fortunate angler than us. An interesting local system is the so-called "harling". With this method, you sit in a wooden rowing boat upstream from the presumed location of the salmon and set out four to six special lures overboard on as many rods. The rowing motion of the skipper causes the crankbaits to move in fan shapes in front of the salmon's mouth... Fishing this way, I did get a hard strike, but unfortunately it didn't hook properly. I nearly committed harakiri on my rod, that's how frustrating it was!

Fortunately, another top predator did cooperate a lot better. In fact: they cooperated too well, because we picked several out of the pool while we were fishing for salmon. We were not too happy about that: after hours of casting you finally get a strike on your rod, and then a

The technique of Harling is to keep the boat in the current in front of the salmon's pitch by rowing. This method gives just the right action to the special crankbaits....





In some places there is peat. You can walk across via wooden boards with more or less dry feet!

green wanna-be salmon surfaces... Bizarrely, we ended up catching the same pike at least four times within one hour! And that wasn't the only one we caught. You come across them regularly at different spots and they offer a nice additional fishery.

Of course, we also targeted pike from the boat. Here they target them above the waterplants. As is the case in many European waters, they grow until just below the surface. With jerkbaits and shallow crankbaits, or with streamers, you get plenty of action. The most successful jerkbait turned out to be a so called Toppie, made by the Dutch lure builder Aad Dam - in a color and pattern that with some good

will reminds you of a grayling... Most pike are not too big - not by Dutch standards anyway. Still, every now and then fish of around 120 cm are caught, and nobody walks away from that. Right?

So in all: you will not get bored for a second there on the island... All the spots are within walking distance, so once you've arrived, you basically don't need to get back in the car. Unless, as we did, you also want to explore another stretch of river, or fish for grayling that live on still water. But all the fishing we did had one thing in common: they were intensely beautiful and special... ■

PRACTICAL

Would you like to experience this too? Then the group trip that Worldsbestfishingtrips is organizing to this area next summer might be something for you. Feel free to scan the QR code to take a look. And if you don't want to join a group trip you can also just book it with your own fishing friends in the period that suits you best.



As a fly fisherman, it is best to bring four rods: a 9-foot #4 for dry fly, a slightly longer #3 rod for euronymphing, a #10 for fishing large streamers for pike and a double-handed #12 for salmon fishing. Barbless Klinkhamers and goldhead nymphs did an excellent job for the grayling! Spin anglers best take an ultralight set to throw small crankbaits, spoons and spinners toward grayling and trout, and an 80-grammer for pike and salmon fishing. For salmon, it is best to bring an assortment of not too large spoons (20-40 grams). Also, of course, a wading suit, wading shoes and a wading stick. In any case, you will receive a complete equipment list after booking!



They do look cute

The lodge has an appropriate welcome sign!

