

Treasure Island

By
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Part One

There are hundreds of public gravel pits across France, all fishable on a regional license. They tend to represent a side of France most UK anglers rarely see, and would probably prefer not to. In these articles, I'd like to present a true picture of this other side of French carp fishing and at the same time describe a summer 2010 Live System campaign on one of them, Art House Pit.



Federation pits tend to be between ten and twenty acres. These are noisy roadside waters dug mostly in the late 50s to provide aggregate for the National Routes, the A roads. Scruffy, rubbish strewn, unstocked free-for-alls where night fishing is banned, the carp populations have been seriously depleted by thieves. The surviving fish are battle weary chunks with justifiable contempt for what has passed for carp angling here in the last fifteen years. I've been fishing these waters for fifteen years, and it's love-hate all the way. They're a case of survival, perseverance, and eventually obsession.

More than likely, you are fishing these pits in conditions you shouldn't have to put up with. This is the France where French carp anglers fish sitting in their cars; access-for-all means your presence as an angler on the bank is not particularly respected. In fact, you have no authority whatsoever among the bankside turmoil, the petrol-heads using it as a race track, the barbeques and bottle smashing youths. The fishing, then, is more than hard. Everything is against you, but it's this I've grown to love. It makes every session a mystery tour, an obstacle race under expedition rules, where poacher's wits are compulsory. You pay dearly for any errors, but you willingly pay dearly for the champagne when it's earned. Every fish is a triumph beyond the normal.

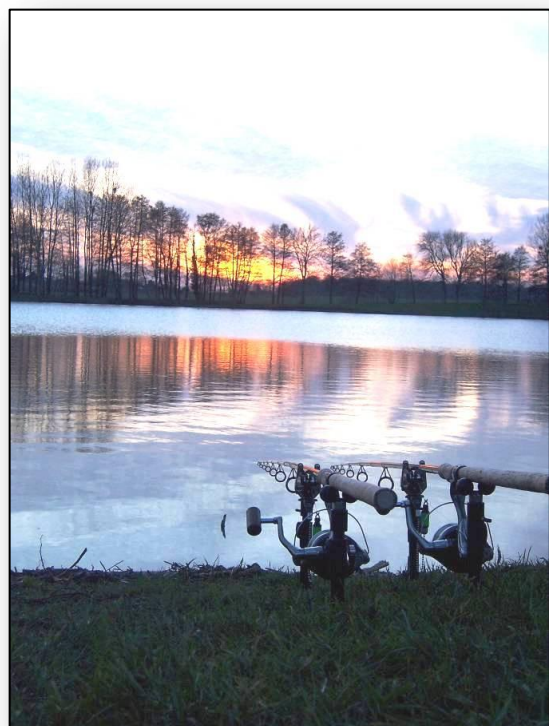
Art House is a moderate challenge in relation to other such pits I know. Fifty consecutive blanks there two winters back didn't alter my opinion. At fifteen acres the fish are at least reachable. A disadvantage when there's no bankside cover and they rarely show themselves. These are carp which have taken invisibility vows; they never show an ankle or an eye and they hog the dark water burrows like buried treasure. Night fishing was banned two seasons ago after years of fishing abuse and carp trafficking; the place somehow got itself in the way between Champagne and Essex. White vans, huge fish on the mobile auction. I have to make the following point now as it underpins my determination to fish these waters, doggedly, to catch and return these tremendous, ancient wild carp.

Carp trafficking in France has totally destroyed the fishing on local Federation waters like mine. Blame lies entirely with the private venues, both French and English owned lakes. Pure, selfish greed which goes mostly unpunished. There won't be many private lakes in France which do not contain a carp stolen from a public water, even if they don't know so. (The fish farmers here are laundering them in their hundreds.) The victims are the local anglers who've had their club pits, municipal ponds and departmental rivers stripped of their carp. Even the twenties disappear now, bound for the stock ponds. I could go on, but I'd just like English anglers to be aware of this. French *carpistes*, for all their faults and differences, are quite justified in their dislike and suspicions of English anglers. Everywhere I fish, I'm accused of nicking carp, just because I'm English and, indeed, because the carp have actually been nicked.



Art House has fewer than thirty original fish left now, but like all public pits it's never been netted or emptied, so exact numbers are unknown. What I can say is that most of the originals are between 30 and 55 lbs. Between 2003-6 an unknown quantity of very big fish were taken. Unless stolen fish are seized live, in transit, nothing legal can be done. The Art House carp disappeared in white vans with GB plates to a well known French owned private venue. They were then sold on in 2008 to English owned venues.

I think by now I've painted that particular picture. The Art House carp have had little respect over the years. They live like rats in a castle, down there, in there, somewhere. Every square yard of the bottom changes; dungeons, troughs, gulleys, plateaus, bars; sunken gravel extractors, bouys, old 2cvs wheels and steel cable. There are thirty foot holes, rocks, stones, gravel, stinking silt, drop-offs, ledges, margins plunging sheer from on high, sandy beaches where it's water off a crucian's back. I've lost count of the number of marker float leads and thermometers I've snagged off here. Six inches out on the cast and your rig can just topple into the unknown and sit uselessly in a heap for hours.



On top of this, four times a year there's an enduro, a carp match-cum-excuse for night fishing. This is the way carp angling is done here. Forty-eight hours of spod fights with Asterix and Obelix, traumatising further the galicians who escaped the raiders first time round. They light fires and barbeques. They fish it like it's Lac d'Orient; beachcaster style, filling it in with half-cooked particles and discount boilies. Two per swim, four rods each, a Carnaby street of

multi coloured tents lit by million candle lamps. Two bream are sometimes attracted by the lights, or the music. Now and then, inevitably, a big fish falls for a junk food boilie and gets sacked for two days while a succession of mates turn up to see it. A fair few fish have souvenirs of their captures, from the barbaric (corners sliced off fins) to downright ignorant handling skill wounds. I've seen one photo of a 50lb mirror held aloft over the standing captor's head like the FA Cup. He put that on a well known French carp forum and there was not a single condemnation; only congratulations.

For four years, then, I resisted fishing there, all that time nagging myself and planning a campaign without realising it. My first view of the place was horrifying; pedalos and inflatable Loch Ness monsters on the water, sunbathers on every inch of bank, tents and campers on the islands, human excrement every yard along the paths. In between all this and seemingly unconcerned, there were bivvies and four-rod set-ups.

Art House is only 15 minutes down the road. I heard rumours, saw a photo or two; big fish, the trafficking, even guns being pulled at night. Eventually, the municipality were forced to act; they banned night fishing and leased the angling to the local federation affiliated association. Barriers were installed to keep vehicles off the banks and I thought it was time to have a closer look. I drove by with the rods in the back, only to be affronted by a contemporary version of Ezekial's vision. Nothing had changed except the cars were confined to the car park. I even saw paramedics resussitating elephant woman beside a supermarket carp rod, her dayglo lilo adrift over 25 feet of water, the "danger no swimming" sign broken up to grill the special belly pork on promo which was smoking on dozens of burning pyres round the bank. Still, the inner voice was insistent; you have to catch these carp, even if it kills you.

I have to admit that I'll do what it takes to catch the big carp in these pits. It's not a fashionable admission, but catching small carp doesn't interest me. Many anglers are afraid to admit this, but if I'm on a big fish campaign, I don't want twenties getting in the way. They're a disappointment; a failure even. If I do fish a water which holds mostly fish under thirty, I won't fish it with a carp set-up. I don't see the point. Standard carp gear is over strength in any case. Testing rigs or baits on small fish only tells you they work on small fish or in overstocked runs waters. I'm not ashamed of this attitude either. I've been carp fishing since 1976. I did my time on twenties.

Art House, being half riot, half holiday camp, meant there was only one way to fish it initially; in winter and in foul weather. Nothing like starting with a handicap. Winter 2008. An upper thirty mirror pinked up on crayfish first cast... except it came off at the net. The hook point had been turned over on the stones by bream. Then the fifty consecutive blanks I've already mentioned, in water temperatures between 3 and 5 degrees centigrade.

I'd let it get to me, and as I said paid dearly for the errors. No bait history, and a prolonged assumption that I'd found a feeding spot, a restricted three foot high bar at sixty yards, (or a rock or even some kind of obstacle, it was hard to tell) in 17 ft of water. In all that time, one fish only showed; on a rocky plateau thirty yards off the island point. I marked the spot and began to bait it with Protovit Liver and Pelzer "The Element". All rigs put on the spot snagged and I had to pull for breaks, even leadless, but I kept the bait going on it all winter, working it left and right a few yards.

I didn't return till september 2009. It was relatively quiet. A moped gang were going through initiation rites up the playground end. I'd seen this lot before, stood drinking in pouring rain after dark, smashing their bottles on the concrete benches. But I set up on the island and nobody knew I was there, or if they did they didn't care. Opposite me, on the basket ball pitch, a mini bus with ten delinquents from borstal were kicking a ball, kept in check by a minder. I tied a rotten bottom to the marker float and explored the plateau around the baited area where I'd seen the fish. It bumped and caught but came back clean. Bream are a problem here, so I rigged up with a 5 inch, 30lb clear Amnesia hooklink and a 2oz running lead on 4ft of lead core. If the bream move it about, so drastic a rig won't be rendered as ineffective as say a combi link. It helps prevent the hookpoint turning over too. I haven't actually used this set up since, for reasons I'll explain later, but at the time it seemed the best option for this horrendous plateau. I've fished barbless for thirty years now and never once regretted it. Hook was a size 8 barbless Korda wide gape, bait an 11mm The Element, balanced with a rig foam sight bob just enough to lift that hook point clear.

I was the only carp angler. A few pike anglers were roving about with lures. It was mild, a slight westerly. The water was down three feet so my favoured spot was in 5ft of water now, temperature on the bottom was 12 centigrade. I had to fish the spot with the hanger tight because slack line gets ripped to shreds on the stones, even fishing across the gully onto the plateau with 18lb Nash Bullet. The lead core was slack enough to bed down.



Early evening, a violent drop back. The bream do this. They somehow drag the lead backwards or topple it off a rock edge into nothing and the hanger just plunges to the floor. I'd hit them before but there was never anything there. I wound down and hit this one to feel a weak kick. I kept winding, thinking a bream had made the gully, till I felt a thump. It was in the gully alright, but running down it, stripping thirty yards with ease. Gloves off, it fought dirty but I managed to weaken it in open water. 34.8 of dignity against the odds. It was a breakthrough fish, and from now on it was every fish or bust.

In the next few articles, I shall describe how fortunes changed when I switched to Live System for the heatwave campaign.

