

Hi all, I hope you're all getting out there and getting amongst a few fish.

I've just returned from a 10 day trip to Belgium/ France which turned out to be one of those trips where nothing seemed to go quite to plan! I had booked my time off much earlier in the year, and was frantically checking the weather forecasts on the internet for a week or two before departure hoping for a nice, mild and settled spell.

Once again I was travelling with my friend Nick (Helleur) and, as is often the way, we hadn't made any concrete plans as such; we were just going to head into Belgium for a couple of nights to start with, before making plans to head off into France with a few possible venues in mind.

The night before we were due to leave, a quick check of the forecast in both Belgium and central/eastern France showed a sudden cold snap, and this was brought to reality even more when Nick received a text message from a mate fishing near Lyon, saying that the temperature the previous night had been minus 6! Not quite beer and tee shirt weather, but Nick's mate had been catching a few; in fact that day he'd had 12 or 13 fish up to 42lb's, so we just made sure to chuck some winter clothing in the car and head off unperturbed anyway!

The crossing was a total nightmare the following day, mainly due to the road widening work on the M25 by Heathrow delaying me by over 2 hours, followed by the Seafrance staff going on strike, causing the Calais port to be closed.. how's your luck eh? After picking Nick up from his home, we slowly made our way to Dover to collect a ticket from the P & O check in desk, before then being diverted back to Folkestone to jump on the Eurotunnel. What a nightmare!

We eventually arrived on the river in Belgium at about 5.30am the following morning, and literally collapsed onto our bedchairs to grab a couple of hours kip before waking up and sorting our plans out over a welcome brew. We had originally planned to spend a few nights on the river and had a couple of areas in mind thanks to a quick reconnaissance trip about a month earlier. The earlier trip had been quite successful with around 7 fish up to low 30's between us in 3 nights fishing, so we had high hopes for a repeat performance on this visit. Sadly though it just wasn't to be, and after 2 nights we were soon loading the car again and heading south towards France with only one lost fish each to show for our efforts. This just goes to highlight the difficulty and uncertainty in locating and catching carp on the big continental rivers - it really is a challenging type of fishing and I've nothing but respect for the lads who do it on a weekly basis, as the good trips are vastly outnumbered by the unsuccessful ones for sure.

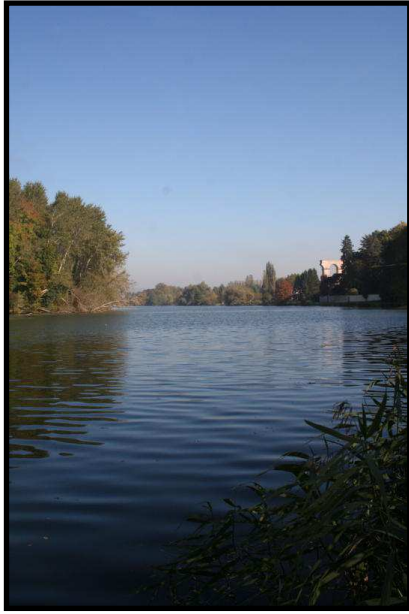
The weather had been quite settled in Belgium, with cold nights but warm, sunny days. The area we had fished was a warm water stretch, due to a large power station discharging it's coolant water into the river, and as a consequence of this the whole valley was like a Turkish bath in the morning. In fact it was so misty I couldn't even see my rods until about 11am and the sun burned the mist away!

As we drove south through the Ardenne Forest, there was still thick frost lying at mid-day and we both hoped there would be sunnier and carpier times ahead.

Our next port of call was a lake not far from the Swiss border near Geneva, and was a venue we'd fished before. Nick had actually been to the lake several times, catching fish up to mid 50's so we were hopeful of a bite or two. After a long drive of 7 hours or so, we arrived at the lake to find a few anglers present, which was a little disappointing as the place was nearly always deserted according to Nick. As it turned out, the lake has been 'discovered' by a few more groups of anglers from both the UK and Holland and Belgium, let alone the local French anglers so it seems that the word is well and truly out regarding the lake's



awesome stock. Nothing lasts forever though, so rather than bemoaning our bad luck too much, we pressed on in finding a plot for a few days and getting the rods out before dark. Luckily, most of the anglers were concentrated at one end of the lake, so we boated our kit down to the far end of the lake's 100plus acres and got set up in a swim which commanded a good area of open water, and a good view down the main body of the lake.



After getting the rods out and cooking a nice meal over a fire (my favourite part of fishing in rural France), I was soon sound asleep and almost in a coma after the long journey and rush to get set up. Next morning, we were still fishless and more importantly hadn't seen a sign of a carp anywhere near us. On Nick's previous visits, the fish were not shy in showing themselves and it seemed a little strange that we hadn't seen a sign of a carp in our area. In the afternoon, the wind picked up dramatically, really blowing into our area but still no fish showed, and we both started to get the feeling that maybe we'd missed our chance here as well. Unbeknown to us at the time, the lake had taken a real battering the week or two before our arrival, and most of the known big fish had been caught, along with a lot of the not-so bigguns as well, perhaps explaining the total lack of action and showing fish.

It seemed like the whole place had gone to sleep, so rather than hang around waiting for things to happen, we decided to make a break for it the next morning and head for pastures new.

Our next venue was one right up in the foothills of the Alps and was around an hours drive from our current location. After loading the car and sorting the 'sat nav' out we were underway and wondering what lay in store ahead. Four nights fishing and no fish wasn't part of the plan, but that's the nature of the beast I guess. If I wanted guaranteed action I would be bivvied up on one of the smaller commercial 'runs' waters, but I've always done my own thing on my foreign excursions, and as long as I'm able bodied enough and have the inclination to do so, I'll carry on fishing the lesser known venues and struggling away.. each to their own I guess!

An hour or so later, we had arrived at the barraged lake next on our list, and were disappointed to find the water level incredibly low.

Nick was still keen to set up for a night or two, spurred on by the knowledge that the lake held some giants to over 70lb, but I just wasn't feeling it at all to be honest.

The first thing that struck me was how cold it was, in fact it was only about 6 degrees compared to the 18 degrees we'd left behind only an hour before.



This was obviously down to the lake being at a much higher altitude, and the cold coupled with the low water soon had us back in the car heading north looking at other bits of blue on the map and scratching our heads trying to come up with a new plan!

About 4 hours later we pulled up at a reservoir in the Dijon area which we knew held some good fish after doing some research on the internet for a few months before our trip.

Amazingly, this lake was also very low, with vast areas of bank exposed as barren mud flats.

Despite the look of the place, we both agreed that this could be our best chance of a fish before heading home in a couple of days, so decided to unload the kit and boat across the lake to an area near to the lake's barrage. This would also enable us to cover the deepest part of the available water to fish, and with the cold weather now well and truly in evidence we felt that this would be our best shout



There was now heavy rain to accompany the cold, and it was a dejected pair of anglers that boated our kit across to our chosen swim. We now also had thick, clinging mud to deal with as well, and this coupled with the driving rain and fruitless effort to keep all of our kit dry led to my morale taking a bit of a nosedive. Conditions were awful and throwing up the bivvy and jumping into bed to warm up was about all I could manage that night! We had to set the bivvies up around 100 metres from the water where the mud was a lot firmer, and the rods were eventually positioned about 20 yards back from the waters edge. In the event of a bite, it would be a case of donning the waders as quickly as possible before running (!) as fast as I could manage through the sludge to the offending rod. This would be interesting!

The lake has a night fishing ban so the plan was to bait our area that first night and start angling at dawn the following day.



After a few hours the rain had abated enough to emerge from the bivvy and have a quick cast around to ascertain the depth of water in front, and potential snaggy areas before putting some bait out with the throwing stick. The area in front of me was flat and snag free, gently sloping down into a central gully of around 20 ft depth. This seemed a likely area for a take so I widely scattered around 3 kilos of 20mm Odyssey xxx boilies in the general area.

I had asked Ian to add a few extra ingredients into the bait, to try and make it more instantly attractive to the carp (if that's possible!) I had included the squid liver powdered extract, along with the Feedstim XP powder and a high level of liquid liver to hopefully send out strong food signals in the baited area. I had also included a low level of the brilliant smoked herring essence; the bait smelt perfect to me, and I was hopeful that a carp would agree before we ran out of time and had to head home. I had also asked Ian to make me up a few custom hookbaits in a larger size (32mm), and with a higher level of attractors, and was hoping these would keep crayfish at bay and single out a better fish or two. Best laid plans once again....!

At dawn next morning, I was knee deep in mud casting my four rods out for the day. During the night I had been awoken by some really big fish jumping out in front of us which was very encouraging. At last it seemed we were on a few fish, and over tea and a bit of breakfast we were in higher spirits than the day before.. especially me as my bottom lip had been trailing in the mud the previous day, much to Nick's amusement! No fish showed at all during the morning, despite watching the water intently, and by around 1pm I was starting to feel a little impatient as I'd hoped for a bite at some stage in the morning. I was actually contemplating recasting a rod into shallower water when a few beeps from my receiver had me scanning all four rods to see which one it was.

Before I could react any more, the receiver let out a constant tone and I ran towards one of my middle rods which was bent in the rests with the clutch yielding line at quite a rate! As I leant into the fish I felt a heavy lunge out in the lake, and instantly thought it felt like a good

fish. Slowly it kited round towards the barrage, and after steering it through Nick's lines I soon had him ready for the net. Nick did a sterling job with the net as always, and after a comical few moments trying to walk from the margins to the unhooking mat, complete with heavy carp, I was soon unhooking and admiring a lovely near-leather in the autumn sunshine.

The first fish of any trip is always the most welcome, and this one was more welcome than ever after the lows of the previous few days. On the scales he weighed 45lb 8oz's, and Nick managed to take some cracking shots before returning him in the muddy margins. I was absolutely buzzing, and soon had another hookbait back in position. Only an hour or so later, Nick had his first fish of the trip, a lovely scattered scaled mirror of just under 40lb's, and as we wound in for the day a short while later we both felt confident for the following and final day before packing up.

That night we again baited with a few kilo's of boilies each, and again we heard numerous fish rolling and jumping out in front.

At first light I was up and casting out, but strangely there was no sign of life from Nick. Around half an hour later he emerged from his bivvy and was soon getting his rods cast out. As I stood next to his rods I noticed a sack cord hanging from the back of our boat. Turned out that he'd got so fed up with hearing fish jumping and rolling, that not long before dawn he'd whacked out a single and caught one straight away..a 44lb leather as it turned out.



Crafty sod! Good bit of angling though, but I was quick to tell him that it didn't count and all that! Before we knew it, it was time to be packing away, but not before Nick had managed a couple more fish up to mid 30's.

Sadly, my rods remained dormant but I was more than happy to be going home with a good fish under my belt after such a difficult trip. Upon returning home it took a whole day clean the mud from my kit, but I'm already counting the days until I can get back for another go!

Tight lines to you all.

Cheers, Mike