

# Fly fishing

## Come fly with me

How does a novice master the mysterious art of trout fishing? Ian Katz attempts to turn himself into a superfly guy

**I**t is not strictly true that Jews don't fish. If you type "Jewish fly fisherman" into Google, you will be served a single link to the website of Eric Eisenkramer, the self-styled "fly fishing rabbi". On it you can read his reflections on whether it's OK to pray for a bite ("sometimes people ask me if my prayers for trout to rise are answered more readily than those of everyone else") or on the compatibility of Judaism with fly fishing: "In my opinion, Shabbat and the fly fishing off-season mean to teach us some of the same values . . ."

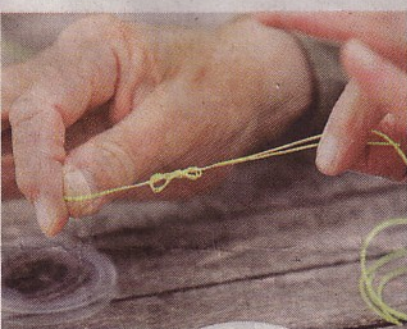
It's safe to say Rabbi Eisenkramer has a keen sense of his own improbability, and when it comes to fishing so have I. It's not just the Jewish thing: my career in the scouts was hamstrung by the fact that I never could master a reef knot, and, as a sensitive teenage vegetarian, the prospect of catching and killing fish seemed to me only slightly less barbaric than foie gras farming.

In time I discovered the joys of both foie gras and, to a point, fishing. The fishing came along with sailing, another improbable, relatively late-in-life enthusiasm. But the brand of angling we dabble in off the side of my little boat – toss an impossibly ugly ragworm over the side and open a bottle of wine – is to fly fishing roughly what karaoke is to the Royal Opera. Once-exclusive pastimes such as skiing

and sailing have been democratised by Britain's growing affluence, but fly fishing seems to have retained its otherness: both defiantly posh and technically forbidding. All those flies! How on earth would you decide which one to use? Even the mysterious, slow-motion casting action seems designed to keep the rest of us out.

Can this Rubicon ever be crossed? Can an oik learn to cast a fly? Arriving in Stockbridge, Hampshire, the Mecca of fly fishing, the first signs are not promising. Dominating the tidy high street is the Grosvenor Hotel, home to the Houghton Club. People talk about the Houghton in hushed tones around here: it has just 25 members (one is Prince Charles) and owns several miles of prime fishing along the Test, arguably the most prestigious chalk stream in the world. No one seems to know how much it costs to join, but ask and you will get a look that suggests cash will be the least of your problems. The price lists for renting a beat (the technical term for a slice of river to call your own for a day) on the Test are scarcely more encouraging: from £150 to £375 during the sought-after mayfly season.

But for the past 18 years, Simon Cooper, a cheery former marketing man, has been quietly chipping away at the sport's elitism from a renovated mill in the village of Nether Wallop, a few miles and a world away from the Houghton. "When I started people



**The brand of angling I usually dabble in is to fly fishing what karaoke is to the Royal Opera**

would never tell you the prices and they'd always say there was a waiting list," he says. "Now all estates have to make their rivers pay, and that has made it more accessible."

Simon offers one and two-day beginners' courses at his "fishing school". Rather optimistically the bumf for our course included the admonition to bring a cold box "for your fish". But though the chalk stream gurgling through the mill was as clear as a snowdome, there was no sign of piscine life.

Our instructor, Duncan Weston, seemed unperturbed. "I've never failed yet," he chuckled when I told him of the sizeable bets that we would return empty-handed. After a brief introduction to the equipment required to get started – "you can buy a Ford and you can buy a Ferrari, but buying a £600 rod is not going to make you a better fisherman" – he explained the central paradox of fly fishing: since



a fly weighs almost nothing and, unlike coarse fishing, there is no weight on the end of the line, how do you propel the fly 20 or 30 feet into a stream? The answer, of course, lies in a combination of the weight of the line itself, the flexibility of the rod, and the mysterious punctuated casting action that should send the line into a perfect horizontal “u” behind the fisherman before it hurtles forwards on to the water. “It’s a spring and all you’ve got to do is cock it, let it go and then let it do its job,” Duncan said, making fly casting sound for all the world as easy as firing a slingshot.

It is not, of course, and we were rudely introduced to the gap between theory and practice when we began casting on the manicured lawn alongside the stream. First there was the challenge of keeping your wrist unnaturally straight (“stop snapping at it like a fairy wand!”), then the question of how long to pause between

PHOTOGRAPHS: SAM FROST

the back and front cast – the critical period during which the rod flexes, gathering the energy to fling the fly forward. On the latter Duncan had this piece of advice: “People say ‘How long do you stop for?’, and I say ‘How long is a piece of string?’.” By which he meant: you get it when you get it.

After a crash course in knots, flies and how to “play” a fish, we were ready to cast for real. We were each assigned a spot 30 or 40 feet apart and began coaxing our bright yellow flylines out across the water. Within minutes my wife, who has an annoying habit of being better than me at almost everything, was whooping with delight as a silvery 2lb rainbow trout splashed about on the end of her line. I had to wait another five or 10 minutes before snagging my own, but after that they came with satisfying regularity: six or seven in all, one of them on the generous side of 4lb.

So is an invite to the Houghton in

**Line management . . . (left to right) Ian Katz is shown how to false cast by instructor Duncan Weston, gets into a tangle, and finally gets into a fish**



the post? Probably not, because this is where I should fill in the missing bit of the story: the bit where after all the practice and theory, we wandered over to a little pond near the mill that was stocked to bursting with rainbow trout. Simon admits there is a fine line between taking all the sport out of catching a fish and ensuring that everyone gets the experience of feeling one on the end of a line.

To my mind the odds in his pond are stacked a little too far in favour of the fisherman, but I don't think we need to get into that with all those who bet I would come home empty-handed,

● *Fishing Breaks* (01264 781988, [fishingbreaks.co.uk](http://fishingbreaks.co.uk)) offers one-day foundation course (Saturday only) for £175 and two-day day courses for £295. Check website for next dates, and for a range of river fishing offered.

Where to stay: *Hotel du Vin, Winchester* (01962 841414, [hotelduvin.com](http://hotelduvin.com)).

Doubles from £130 per night.