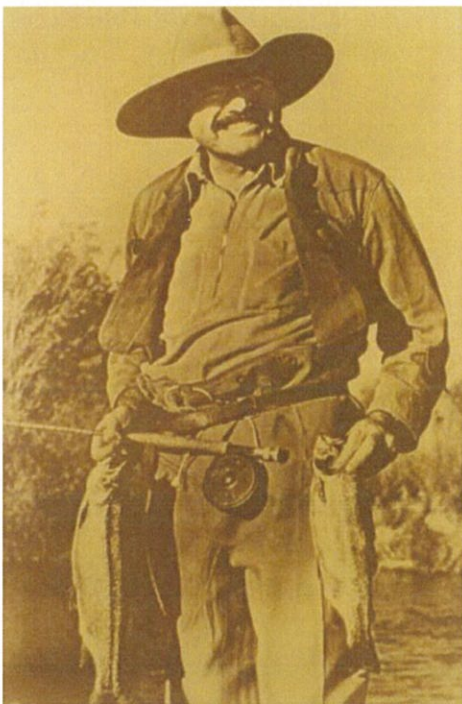


## IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF HEMINGWAY

*"You're sure this thing has trout in it?" Bill asked.  
"It's full of them"  
"I'm going to fish a fly. You got any McGintys?"  
"There's some in there"  
"You going to fish bait?"  
"Yeah, I'm going to fish the dam here"  
"Well, I'll take the fly-book then" He tied on a fly.  
"Where'd I better go? Up or down?"  
"Down is the best. They're plenty up above, too."*

### *The Sun Also Rises, Chapter XII*

Ernest Hemingway was a larger-than-life figure. A teenage ambulance driver in the Great War, severely wounded in action and decorated as a war hero, a newspaper man, war correspondent, enthusiastic amateur boxer, Spanish bull-fighting aficionado, prize-winning author and prolific writer of short stories, big game hunter and fisherman, his life was more colourful and dramatic than those of his fictional characters. Men wanted to be like him, women wanted to meet him and fall under his spell. He was also a keen fly-fisherman for trout.



### *Café Iruña sepia print of Hemingway*

In 1921 a, newly-married, 22 year old Hemingway came to Paris for the second time, and stayed for seven years. The first time was in 1918, on his way to the Italian Front to drive a Red Cross ambulance, where he would be gravely wounded by mortar shrapnel and hospitalised for three months.

Paris in the 1920s was the place to be for young Americans aspiring to literary greatness, and after initially writing newspaper features and short stories Hemingway moved on to more serious works. His first novel *The Sun Also Rises*, which some now consider his best and most important work, was published during his second visit, in 1926.

*The Sun Also Rises* is about a group of young American and English people living in Paris who decide to visit Pamplona in Northern Spain for the Festival of San Fermin and to go trout fishing in the nearby Pyrenees Mountains.

Pamplona (or Iruña as it is called in the Basque language), located only 41 kilometres from Spain's border with France, is the capital of the Navarre region in Basque-country heartland. Today a modern city of just under 200,000 people surrounds the wonderfully pre-

served walled old city. Around the world, Pamplona is best known for the daily 'running of the bulls' during the week-long Festival of San Fermin, held annually each second week of July.

Hemingway loved Pamplona, its traditions and surrounding region. He first visited for the Festival in 1923, returning the following year when, accompanied by his wife and friends, he also went trout fishing for the first time in the Irati River – with great success.

In 1925, before attending the Festival, Hemingway again went fishing in the Irati. Unfortunately, on this second trip lumbermen had run logs down the river, spoiling the fishing and over four days not a single fish was caught.

These early visits to Pamplona inspired Hemingway to write his first novel, in which the fictional characters and events are based on his own experiences. All up, between 1923 and 1959, Hemingway visited Pamplona and participated in

the Festival nine times.

Pamplona returned Hemingway's admiration and affection. He was considered an *aficionado*, or knowledgeable enthusiast, in the cultural art of bullfighting, one of the few foreigners to be held in such high esteem. In 1968 he was honoured with a statue erected in front of the city's Plaza de Toros (bull-ring).



#### *Hemingway bust outside the Pamplona bullring*

Hemingway's other main haunts were the hotels and cafes of the central city square, the Plaza del Castillo. His favourite was the Cafe Iruña, a cavernous, mirrored and columned establishment, founded in 1888.

Today, the most interesting reminders of the Hemingway era can be found in the adjoining lounge bar, which has a life-sized statue of the writer propped against the bar.

There is also a wonderful collection of period photos on the walls. Of these, a sepia print of a young Hemingway in his prime, kitted out in full fly fishing attire and displaying a fine catch of trout is the most eye-catching for a fly-fishing enthusiast.

But when Hemingway needed a break from the bullfights and cafe life of Pamplona he would retreat to the cool, green solitude of Navarre's Pyrenees mountain villages of Burguete and Arike.

#### *Hemingway statue in the bar at Cafe Iruña*

In Hemingway's novel, two of the characters, Jake Barnes and Bill Gorton, also undertake what seems like a long journey to Burguete on the top of a bus, drinking wine out of a leather wine bottle in the company of colourful Basque peasants. Today it takes less than an hour to reach Burguete on the bus to Roncesvalles, the last town before the border with France, even when the bus has to slow frequently to manoeuvre past cyclists on the narrow winding road.

The village of Burguete was Hemingway's base for trout fishing excursions to the nearby Irati River. In the novel Jake and Bill walk from Burguete to Arike on the Irati River to go fishing, although the writer was probably using literary license. At a distance of more than 10 kilometres it is likely further than can reasonably be achieved in a cross-country walk as described.

Hemingway liked to stay at the Hotel Burguete, which is still much as it was in Hemingway's time, or so the current proprietors would have you believe.





### *Hotel Burguete*

Looking out from room 23, Hemingway's favourite room, on any morning these days you will see a procession of backpack-toting hikers and lycra-clad cyclists. These are modern day pilgrims, starting out on the Camino de Santiago (or Way of Saint James), the Middle Ages Christian pilgrimage route to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. This starts at Saint Jean on the French side of the border. From there, for those who go the distance, it is a journey of nearly 700 kilometres to Santiago, in Galicia, in the far north-west corner of Spain.

In Hemingway's time there would have been few pilgrims, as interest in undertaking the journey had largely died out. But in recent years, possibly due as much to increased

interest in European walking and cycling holidays as any religious reawakening, there has been a resurgence such that almost half a million people each year travel the Camino; either all or part of it.

While Hemingway preferred to stay at Burguete, he had to travel to the village of Aribe to fish the Irati River.

Arife, a village of 62 inhabitants, is located in a rocky valley surrounded by dense beech forest. It was once famous for its curative thermal baths, which were open to the public from 1863 to 1960. This section of the Irati River, called Los Baños (The Baths), was Hemingway's favourite.

Downstream of the village is a dam, the setting for the fishing scene in his novel. In truth, it is a low dam that many of us would more likely describe as a weir. Just below the weir is a spring that in the novel Jake uses to cool bottles of wine. These days, above the weir is a modern suspension footbridge that allows anglers access to both sides of the river, both upstream and down.

### *Crossing the footbridge at Los Baños*

The Irati River (or Rio Irati as it is known locally) actually starts across the border in France. In its upper reaches it runs through the Irati Forest, an uninhabited, relatively pristine wilderness area that provides sanctuary for deer, wild boar and other wildlife and also assures purity of water quality. This makes for excellent trout habitat. The Irati is a headwater tributary of the Ebro River, Spain's biggest by volume and second longest in length, which flows into the Mediterranean Sea to the south of Barcelona.

The Iberian brown trout of the Irati River are therefore a true Mediterranean trout subspecies, although today downstream access is restricted both by warm water temperatures and many massive dams. In appearance they often display dark vertical bands and have a black spot behind the eye.



Iberian trout live on the periphery of the brown trout's natural range, the upper limit being water temperatures in the low 20 degrees Celsius. The region is, however, very important for the genetic diversity of the species as a whole. It was one of the refuges for brown trout when they were forced out of other parts of Europe during the Ice Ages. Unfortunately, rising water temperatures due to climate change are now forcing the Iberian trout further upriver,



where upstream migration to avoid stress of higher temperatures is often blocked by dams.

***Iberian brown trout with dark vertical bands and black spot behind eye***

It is little wonder then that fishing on the Irati River is closely monitored, highly restricted, and regulations are strictly enforced. Fishing is only permitted for two months each year, in May and June, subject to discretion as to whether fish numbers warrant an open season. There is also no stocking permitted, so as to preserve the purity of the gene pool. The fishery is therefore totally dependent on natural spawning and recruitment. Although a licence is required to fish, the cost of 12 Euro is very reasonable for the fishing quality available.

My fishing on the Rio Irati was made possible by Yvon Zill, a French trout guide who guides in the Basque country on both sides of the border and has an interesting and very informative website, appropriately called “Basque Country Fishing Guide”: <[basquecountry-fishing-guide.com](http://basquecountry-fishing-guide.com)>

As I was on a lengthy journey around Spain, time constraints meant I was limited to one day of fishing, always a risky proposition in a past time such as trout fishing, where river and fishing conditions can be so weather-dependent. We agreed that 28 May (mid-season) was convenient for both of us, and arrangements were made to meet up in Burguete in the morning.

Any concerns I had about fishing conditions were magnified as I approached Pamplona on the intercity coach from Barcelona. There had been rain, lots of rain. Streams were running high and discoloured. This was going to be a challenge, I thought.

An email exchange with Yvon the next day allayed my fears. While streams were high, they would likely start to fall and clear by the time we went fishing. And the cool, wet conditions might even be good for the fishing, as insect hatches would occur throughout the day. On sunny, hot days insect activity is often restricted to an evening rise. So I was looking forward to fishing when we finally met up outside the Hotel Burguete at 10 in the morning on a cool, overcast, rain-threatening day.

Yvon proved to be an excellent fly-fisherman and convivial fishing companion who had developed his skills over 35 years, during which time he had fished extensively overseas, in North America, Australia and New Zealand. He also proved to have an intimate knowledge of the Irati River and how best to fish it.

As the river was still running high and a little discoloured, and there was as yet little insect activity, we elected to start fishing well-upstream, and move further down to fish Los Baños later in the day.

Even then the height and strength of the river flow made it difficult to keep a sure footing when wading and, after 20 minutes of fishing a small dry fly and nymph on dropper combination I was still fishless. Then a change to a single large bead-head nymph proved the key to success. On the second or third cast, as the nymph was swinging around and rising in the current the line tightened. I was fast to my first Iberian brown trout. But after another 15 minutes of casting without further success we decided to move to Los Baños.

On our way back to the car we were approached by a tall Spaniard who started speaking to Yvon in French. After a few moments Yvon explained that the Spaniard was a Government forest game warden who wanted to inspect my fishing licence. Overcoming my amazement at being asked to show my licence for the first time in my life, and after less than an hour on the stream, I produced the various documents Yvon had arranged for me. Thankfully all was in order in order, except the catch details were not yet recorded.



*A fine specimen of Iberian brown trout*

While the warden recorded the length, time of capture and so forth of my solitary catch, he started an animated conversation with Yvon. Not speaking French, I had no idea what they were talking about. Yvon later explained that they were speaking French because he did not speak Spanish and it was common for government officials working in the border regions to be bilingual. The conversation became so animated because the warden was describing to Yvon how earlier that morning he had seen a trout he estimated to weigh nine kilograms. Such are the benefits of a well-managed fishery.

When we arrived downstream at Los Baños there was little activity, so we enjoyed a delicious lunch of Basque pâté, smoked ham, French cheeses and fresh fruit, during which Yvon apologised repeatedly for the bread, which he had bought in Spain. Apparently, only in France is it possible to find acceptable bread. After lunch the rain, which until then had been a light drizzle, started to fall much harder. I could tell that even Yvon was becoming concerned when I heard him mutter, in perfect English and, I swear, with an Australian accent, “*bloody rain!*” No doubt his earlier career in the French Navy, when he endured the rigours of overseas postings to Reunion Island (near Mauritius) and New Caledonia, provided an opportunity to hone his English language skills in order to meet NATO requirements. A posting in 2005 on board the “Ocean Viking”, an Australian vessel performing surveillance patrols in the Southern Ocean would also have contributed to his excellent command of the language.

*Los Baños with fishing guide Yvon Zill in the foreground*

But the rain proved a blessing. It signalled the start of a hatch of the largest mayflies I had ever seen. As is usually the case, the trout took their cue and started rising up and down the river. In response I fished a large dry fly, but initially had trouble setting the hook, even though the trout where very willing to come to the fly.

I thought I must have been trying to set the hook too soon, the usual cause of such problems. But Yvon explained the cause of my difficulties was the exact opposite. In the fast flowing water it was necessary to set the hook as soon as the fish took the fly, before it discovered the ruse.

This piece of advice made all the difference. As the hatch continued, during most of the afternoon, I hooked and landed four trout, and had at least as many more also come to the fly. We fished above and below the weir; the fish often rising right next to the bank.

That was how my fishing at Los Baños went.





*Los Baños on a good day*

But how did Jake and Bill, the characters in *The Sun Also Rises*, fare? At Chapter XII, we find out:

*Bill sat down, opened up his bag, laid a big trout on the grass. He took out three more, each one a little bigger than the last, and laid them side by side in the shade from the tree. His face was sweaty and happy.*

*"How are yours?"*

*"Smaller."*

*"Let's see them."*

*"They're packed."*

*"How big are they really?"*

*"They're all about the size of your smallest."*

*"You're not holding out on me?"*

*"I wish I were."*

*"Get them all on worms?"*

*"Yes"*

*"You lazy bum!"*

Hemingway was indeed a trout fisherman. More than that, he was obviously a fly-fisherman.

*Bob Beamish*