

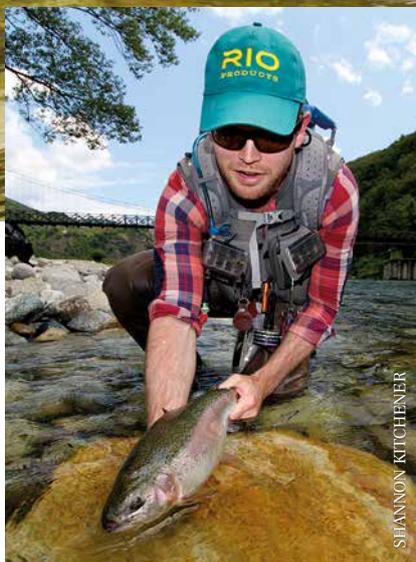
# Postcard

Joshua Hutchins



Chris Wade

## Winter Escape, Euro-style



Main: Sesia River, Italy.  
Inset: Sesia rainbow trout.

SHANNON KITCHENER



here are many kinds of fly fishers. They include casual once-or-twice-a-year attendees, socialites who might head out once a month if the conditions are right, and the totally obsessed. The last group have fly fishing forever on their minds. I know, because I am one. For us there is never a closed season, just opportunities to chase other options.

This year my other option was a trip to Europe, taking me through northern Italy, Slovenia and northern Spain.

### ITALIAN LEOPARDS & FLUORO TROUT

On the surface, Italy doesn't seem a top fly fishing destination. However, after emailing local guides, digging a little deeper on Italian fly fishing web pages, and befriending a passionate fly-fishing Italian, I discovered some great

information. I decided to base myself in a small town called Varallo in the hills of Piermont, an hour's drive north-west of Milan. This area offers some beautiful rivers.

My visit coincided with another Aussie, Shannon, who was travelling with his family and set some time aside to join me. We met at the hotel in Varallo and, both very keen to hit the water, made our way to the club house on the Sesia River.

The rivers here fall into three categories: 'free water' (under a national licence), restricted areas, and those controlled by reserves. The reserves hold wild and stocked trout and are usually money well spent. Reserve licences in hand, we set up on the river.

It was fast, high and very clear. Our initial success was with Tongariro-type heavy nymphs. With several nice fish to hand, I decided it was time to give a dry fly a go – it was summer, after all. A big Chernobyl-style grasshopper with a small orange-necked Pheasant Tail dangling below seemed like the perfect combination. It wasn't long before a very pretty brown trout took the floater, and a few casts later a rainbow of about five pounds took the dropper nymph.

The Sesia produced many solid hard-fighting rainbows, beautifully coloured browns, and the odd sign of a marble trout. The dry fly action in the slack



Mastallone River, Italy.

## Postcard

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water was great fun and produced many nice fish.

The Mastallone, another river on my radar, had previously been so low it was unfishable, but plenty of spring rain had restored it to beautiful condition. I phoned Roberto the river keeper. A very broken English-Italian conversation conveyed that the river was fishing well, but the weekend was very busy with many anglers. Nevertheless we set off for the water. It was gorgeous. The upper section of the reserve was a stunning open valley, with rapids interspersed with deep pockets. The river made its way through large boulders and into a tight gorge before meeting the Sesia at the town of Varallo.

The Mastallone was a pleasure to fish. Everywhere it held nice trout. It was normal to land 30 to 50 a day. Rainbows, browns, marbles, hybrids (marble and brown) and the beautiful 'leopard' rainbow trout were all on offer. We caught rainbows up to around five pounds, but the highlight was the magnificent markings of the leopard trout. Each one we caught was mesmerising.

Another highlight was the last fish I caught before packing up. It was around 8 p.m. and the sun was only just considering it might be time to set. I cast a large dry fly into the top of a likely run. Within seconds it was smashed by

an energetic half-pounder. Not until it came closer did I realise how stunning it was: a brown trout with orange fluorescent spots. My eyes could scarcely believe it. I was later told it was most likely a hybrid between a brown and a marble trout.

For an area that does not get much mention in fly fishing circles, north-west Italy delivered some great fishing. It's well worth a visit.

### THE SLOVENIAN METRE

After driving across the top of Italy and into Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, I enjoyed almost a sense of familiarity. I had visited three times previously, and it has become one of my favourite des-

tinations. It is easily reached by plane, train or car, the people are very friendly and the country has some of the best scenery and clear rivers that the world has on offer.

This time I was set on hunting down a big marble trout. These are only known to exist in rivers that flow into the Adriatic Sea. I had never imagined a river trout could grow in excess of a metre, but there were stories of some that long and weighing 30–40 pounds.

If you want to catch one you need to fish specific waters like the Idrijca and Soca rivers. If you want to catch a big one, you need to have everything on your side. A local guide gives you the upper hand in locating marble trout and having any chance of landing these cunning creatures: Rok Lustrik was to be our master for the next few days.

We set off to the Idrijca River and paid the hefty 90 Euro licence. This is the price for fishing one day in the trophy zone. We landed several great rainbows by early afternoon, but no big marble trout was going to be fooled in low water on this hot summer day. Rok had a backup plan and we made our way to a small creek of the Idrijca system. In the first run, we spotted a marble trout of around four pounds. I proceeded to cast, but from take through "Woohoo!" I was devastated. It takes a lot to get these trout to cooperate, so losing one hurts!

Several pools later, we spotted another good one. Shannon placed several casts over it before it took and the action was back on. It was a crazy fight, involving a run of several hundred metres downstream and a hook that was almost straightened. This was our first look at a marble of around six

That big marble trout, Slovenia.



ROK LUSTRIK



SHANNON HUTCHINS

Slovenian marble trout aftermath.

pounds. The amazing markings were unlike any trout we had seen before.

That evening we fished the sort of hatch that normally exists only in dreams. Trout rose everywhere we looked. During the last two hours of light, one or both of us seemed hooked up at any given moment. We landed brown, marble, rainbow and hybrid trout. Our 90 Euro licence soon faded into the back of our minds.

We enjoyed many days of wonderful fishing over Slovenia's beautiful and varied water. However, I was yet to land a big marble. On the final day I asked Rok if it was possible to try again for a big marble.

He replied, "It is very difficult without high, murky water to fool the big marble, but there is one spot I know..."

That was all I needed to hear.

We made our way back to the Idrijca River and bought a licence for the 'B' Section. This comes at a 'cheaper' 60 Euros per day. We decided to ignore as many feeding rainbow trout as possible and stay on the hunt for a marble trout.

The moment that followed is hard to recount. Every time I relive the hour that changed my fly fishing forever,

the endorphins surge back through my body.

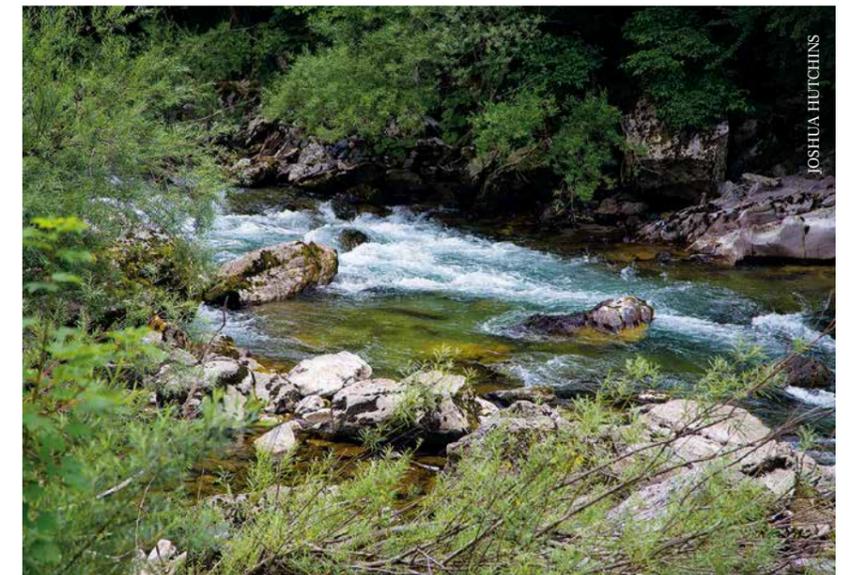
After catching several nice rainbows that we couldn't walk past, Rok declared "If we have a chance at a marble it will be in this next run." It flowed from a large pool and was deep and fast. Scattered boulders created current in all directions and produced enough white water to give cover for any beast lurking within.

We were almost at the top of the run and had still seen nothing, until: "Rok!



JOSHUA HUTCHINS

Leopard trout, Mastallone River.



JOSHUA HUTCHINS

Home of the big marble trout.



ROK LUSTRIK

# Postcard

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Stop! I think I saw a huge tail out the back of that run. Yes, look right there." The fast water cleared for a moment and we both locked onto the biggest trout I have ever witnessed.

Trying our best to keep calm, we discussed the plan of attack and made our way into position. "Nymph or streamer?" Rok asked me. "Nymph first," I said. By this stage I was thinking my 4-weight was a bad choice.

Several casts went unnoticed, so we changed our angle to better manage the wild current the fish was sitting in. Then the line stopped dead and the trout changed position. "I'm on!" I yelled, as my heart instantly made its way towards my mouth.

There was a moment of stillness before everything erupted. The fish swam past us, just enough to give a good view and turn me to jelly. Forty minutes later and 300 metres downstream, I brought it to hand. It was a majestic 108 cm and an estimated 25-30 pounds. No wonder I'd been concerned about my size 12 nymph and 10 lb tippet!

After my joyous scream filled the valley, we took pictures and retired to the pub. Even the fisheries manager came down to celebrate and witness the photos. I commented that it had taken me four trips to get that fish. They laughed and said jealously, "It takes ten lifetimes for everything to fall in place to catch that fish."

Slovenia holds a very special place in my heart.

## SPANISH HEATWAVE

I arrived in Spain and, for the first time in my life, had no urgency to go fishing. Pamplona was extremely busy with the 'running of the bulls' and the temperature was pushing the high 30s. Convinced myself I had plenty of time, I headed to San Sebastian for a day of beach and shopping. It's a very beautiful area. I could have lazed on that beach for a week.

Slapping myself back into fishing mode, I made my way to the hills of Cantabria in the north. A local guide, Oscar Quevedo, was kind enough to organise my fishing licences and leave me directions to get to the water from my hotel. If I thought the fishing rules in Italy and Slovenia were elaborate, Spain went one step further. Fly-fishers require local knowledge to decipher where they can and can't fish. Some areas are under a lottery system to allow even one day's fishing within a year. However, there are also many areas for free fishing under the regional licences, the best of them controlled by a No Kill policy.

The heatwave made things tough. Even the day I fished with Oscar, an extremely skilled angler, it was hard

work to get fish. We landed some native brown trout, up to around two pounds, but all the larger fish stayed in hiding.

The mountains in the back country of Cantabria and Castilla Y Leon were breathtaking. Oscar told me about the wolves and bears hidden within the rocky outcrops and the vultures that circled the mountain tops. Wild flowers lined every river and roadside stop and the scenery definitely made up for the slow fishing.

## REFLECTIONS

I had barely scraped the surface of European fly fishing, but it was much better than expected. I sat at the airport in Madrid, contemplating the 22 hours of air travel back to Sydney's winter, and embraced the summer heat one last time. The satisfaction of each day's fishing buzzed in my mind, and I still got chills replaying the moment of the metre-long marble trout.

Not every day works in a fisherman's favour, but the days that do are never forgotten.

Slovenia: [www.lustrik.com](http://www.lustrik.com)

Italy: [www.valsesiapesca.it](http://www.valsesiapesca.it)

Spain: [www.amoscaguas.com](http://www.amoscaguas.com)



SHANNON KITCHENER

A Slovenian rainbow trout comes to hand.



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