SLOVENIA

Fishing your mind empty

ALTHOUGH many people have heard of Slovenia, few can point it out on a map and even fewer can name the capital. This lack of knowledge is precisely what makes Slovenia such a great place to visit — and to fish.

Slovenia is an uncrowded Alpine country, nestled just east of Italy and south of Austria. The people are friendly and laid-back, the country is postcard pretty and the fishing is certainly not to be sneezed at. The capital is a charming city named Ljubljana.

FLYING OUT

My wife was due to attend a conference in Ljubljana, and seeing as a stopover in London was mandatory for South Africans to pick up visas, I decided to tag along and catch up with family in London. The plan was to then stay in London for a few days before flying into Ljubljana for the 36 hours that my wife needed for the conference, and then come home. Now, of course, I realise that the plan to not spend more time in Slovenia was a bit daft. I guess I'll just have to go back some day.

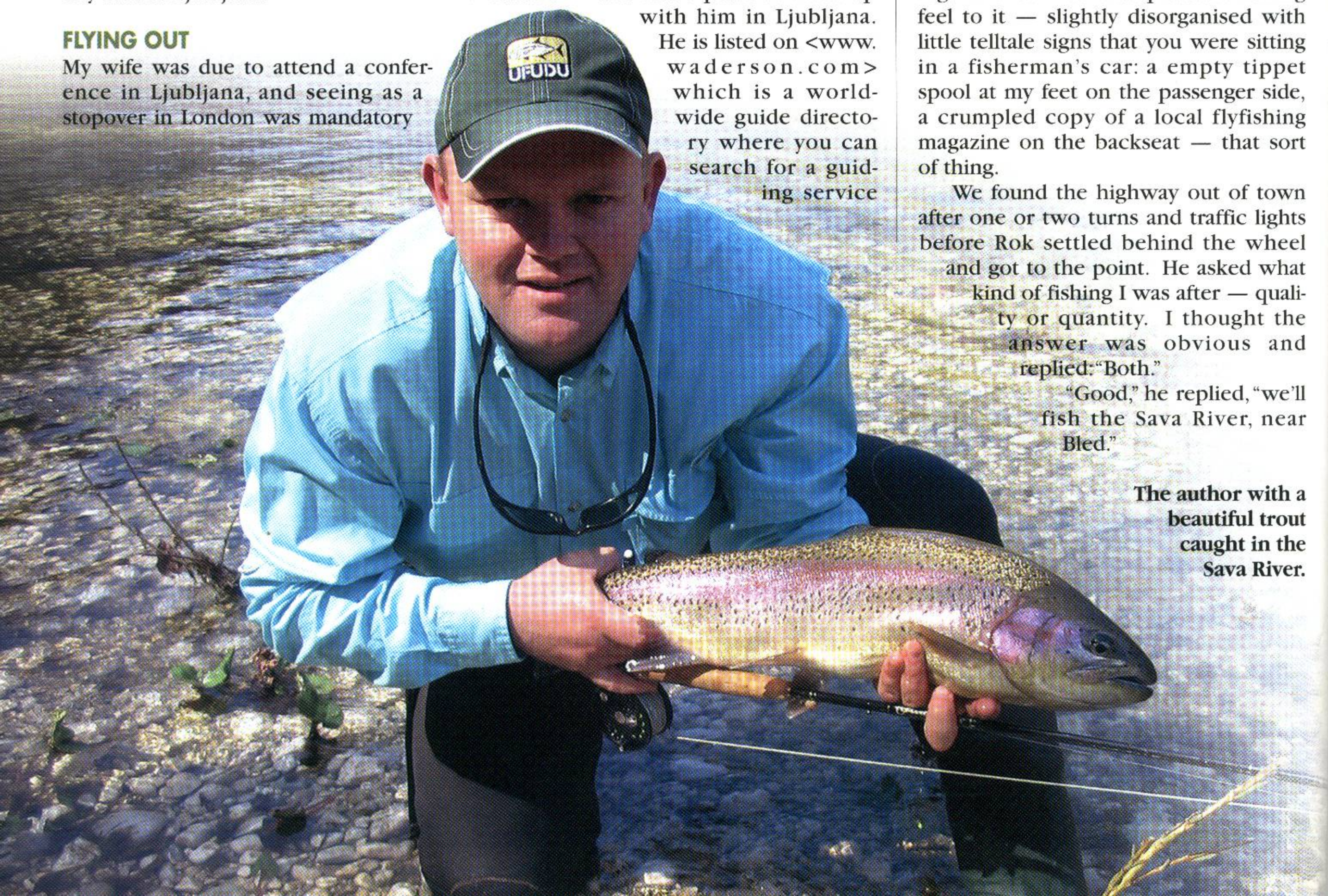
Before leaving South Africa I managed to get hold of probably the only flyfishing guide in Slovenia — Rok Lustrik — and made plans to meet up with him in Ljubljana. He is listed on <www.waderson.com> which is a worldwide guide directory where you can search for a guiding service pretty much anywhere.

He picked me up from the hotel in Ljubljana at 7.30am and we hit the road, with me not having a clue where we were going or what river we would be fishing. In fishing, as in life, you sometimes need to apply a little blind faith.

Rok is a pleasant fisherman-cum-general outdoor kind of guy, and I immediately had the feeling that I was fishing with a buddy as opposed to someone who got paid to take me fishing. His car had that pleasant fishing feel to it — slightly disorganised with little telltale signs that you were sitting in a fisherman's car: a empty tippet spool at my feet on the passenger side, a crumpled copy of a local flyfishing magazine on the backseat — that sort of thing.

We found the highway out of town after one or two turns and traffic lights before Rok settled behind the wheel and got to the point. He asked what kind of fishing I was after — quality or quantity. I thought the answer was obvious and replied: "Both."

"Good," he replied, "we'll fish the Sava River, near Bled."



The author with a beautiful trout caught in the Sava River.

by Jean Struweg

Visitors to Slovenia will be overwhelmed by the incredible scenery along rivers like the Soca River (right) and lakes like the one at Bled (bottom) where the Church of Assumption is situated with mountains as a backdrop.

The hour-long drive to the river gave me the opportunity to see a bit of the countryside. Rok explained that Slovenia is quite small and most fishing spots are within two hours' drive of Ljubljana. There are a few ski resorts to visit as well, if you are that way inclined.

Bed and breakfast accommodation is available all over, as are campsites if you are travelling on a budget. We found Slovenia to be much cheaper than the rest of Europe and not much more expensive than South Africa.

If you are after a quality European fishing experience without breaking the bank, you won't go far wrong by going to Slovenia. And if you need a guide, you won't go far wrong by looking up Rok Lustrik. Rok, I later found out, sports a degree in tourism, and when he's not guiding fishing clients or working as an instructor on the ski slopes, he is a tour guide in Slovenia, and the neighbouring Bosnia and Croatia. This all makes for a fishing guide with a thorough knowledge of the entire region, its history, politics and other interesting snippets of information.

THE SAVA RIVER

Driving through the lakeside town of Bled, we soon got to the Sava River. Rok settles rod tickets with the clubs once per season, so we could get fishing straight away. The river was running crystal-clear, and walking over the bridge I spotted a number of trout in the 20-inch range in three feet of water. Wiping the foam from my mouth, I wanted to get casting straight away.

"No good, they're spawning," Rok grunted, and walked downstream. I trudged along, thinking that I would have liked at least one cast at those fish, you never know. But I was in Rome, and thought it best to do as the Romans do, so I stifled my thoughts.

Rok soon identified another likely looking spot and I started fishing. During the first hour I missed many takes, but after having landed a few small ones I got into the groove. Then the river keeper arrived, and after a brief chat with him Rok told me that we had to move quickly. He had wanted to save a prime trophy spot on the river for later in the day, but the river keeper informed him that the Slovenian national team was arriving to fish there during the course of the morning. So off we sped and 15 minutes later I set

Slovenia is just magnificent in the summer, and yields numerous rainbow trout to her fishing guests.
Photos by Rok Lustrik.

eyes on a piece of water that took my breath away.

The stream was wide, running clear over white pebbles. Against the tree-lined far bank a deeper channel ran, almost black in colour, carving away at the bank and the shadows.

"There be trout," I thought.

While wading across, icy water infiltrated my waders through a tiny hole, sucking the air from my lungs via the soft skin in my crotch. Once on the other side we cautiously walked the bank, staying away from the edges and watching the water carefully.

Rok suddenly grabbed my arm, the way one would if your companion was about to step on a snake. A big rainbow casually finned in the current and my first sight fishing opportunity presented itself.

LOSING A BIG FISH HURTS, BUT NOT FOR LONG!

We retreated from the bank and discussed tactics. To be more accurate, Rok talked and I listened. Seeing as the salmon were spawning, the plan was to trick the trout with a Glo-bug. I drifted the pale pink ball of fluff over the trout two or three times and bang! Rok watched me while I played the fish cautiously, mindful of the fragile 5X tippet. He warned me to keep the fish away from the main current.

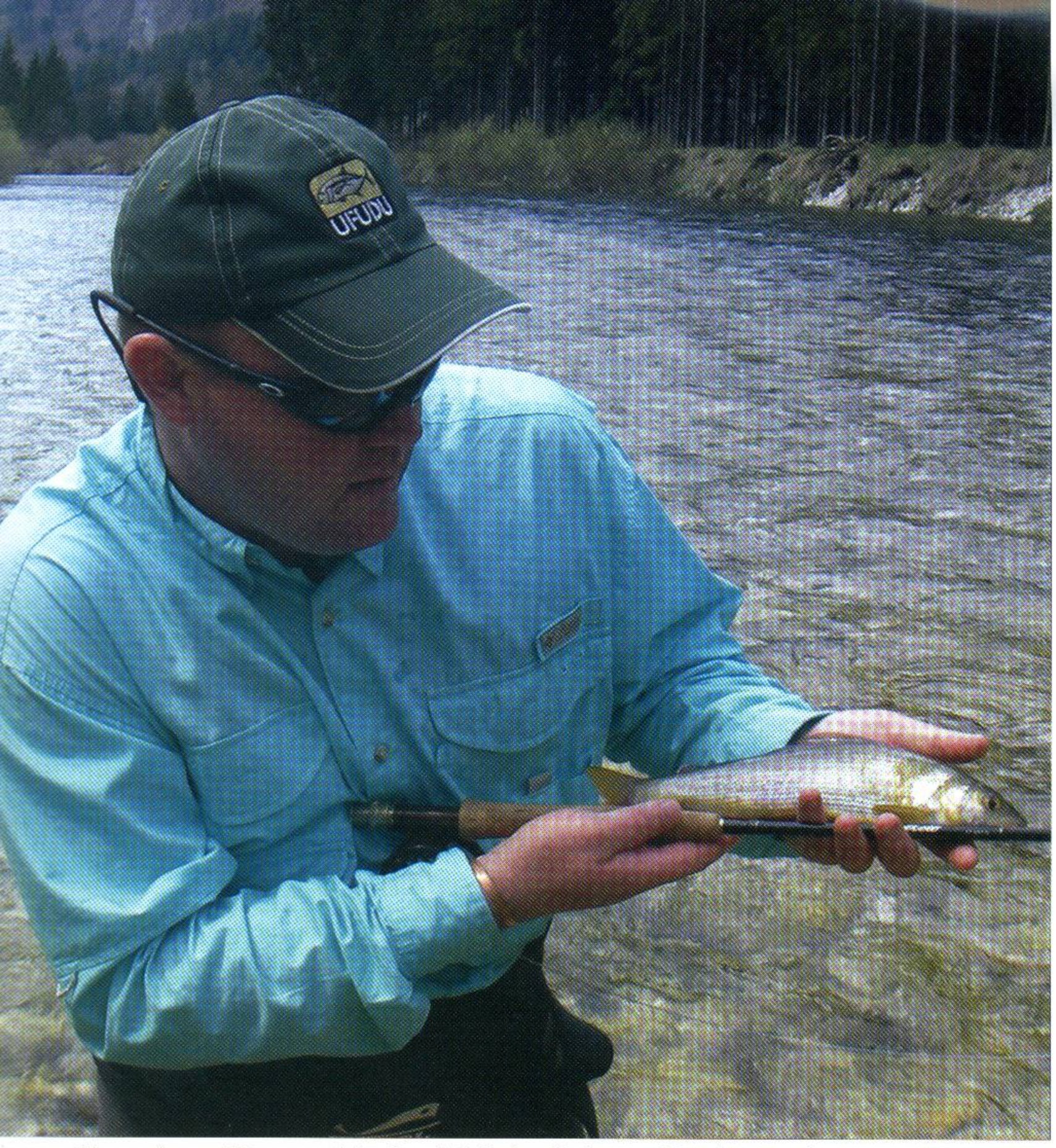
The trout must have heard him, and coupling that knowledge with the realisation that it was hooked, it sped away into the main current and all went slack. As quick as that. My heart sank. It would certainly have been my biggest trout to date. I felt my jaw line turn white. I breathed out slowly and accepted my loss.

We continued to stalk the bank, bitter about the lost opportunity. Surely we wouldn't see another as big.

Less than five minutes passed and once more Rok's fingers buried into my arm. Getting better at spotting fish, I immediately saw the object of his focus. I was looking at another trout — just as big as the previous fish.

A quick discussion yielded the same tactics as I'd used earlier, only this time with a 2X tippet. We planned to step it down if the fish refused it. On the third drift I got it right — and bang! Fish on. I gave the trout little chance to run and pulled hard. The fat rainbow surfaced reluctantly and an excited Rok dropped to his stomach to net the fish and proceeded, without ceremony, to topple into the river. There were a few anxious moments, and then the rainbow was safely netted.

What might have been a humorous



The author with one of the hard-fighting little grayling he caught.

chain of events for a non-angler was a pretty hair-raising experience for me. I gazed at the beauty in the net and then realised what had just happened. I had my best-ever trout, it was a wild river fish and I had the privilege of having sight fished it! What more could an angler want from a day's fishing?

We quickly took some photos and in no time I was cradling the fish into the current, watching its gills flare rhythmically as it caught its breath. In the haste to secure a successful release we neither weighed nor measured the fish. Afterwards I was able to establish the fork length from the photos, measuring the length of the rod that I held the fish against. She was about 67cm in length. Not too shabby.

We continued to fish, albeit with less determination, for the rest of the day in perfect surroundings with the river tumbling along at the foot of the Slovenian Alps.

SPOILT BY SHEER SIZE

Not long afterwards, another big fish presented itself. Applying similar tactics as we'd used before, we took a shot at it. Out of nowhere a smaller, though still enviable fish darted forwards and took the Glo-bug right from under the larger fish's nose. Having been spoilt casting to big fish, this queue jumper was not viewed in good favour.

As the day progressed, I caught numerous trout and had the good fortune of adding grayling to my list of species caught on fly. I found them tough little fighters, but was frustrated at how few I landed of those I hooked. Rok explained that they have very soft mouths, which causes the hook to tear out easily. At the end of the day I lost count of the number of fish I landed, but it was probably close to 15. I also lost at least two for every one I landed.

I was lucky with the weather: the sun was out and in spite of some drops falling around lunchtime, the weather held up. The ambient temperature was certainly comfortable, but with the water being mainly snowy meltdown, the river was a chilly 6°C.

Trout fishing is good from March to November, with the salmon season open during the winter months. Be warned, though: a ratio of one fish for every two days' fishing is considered good going for winter salmon. In addition to that, the rod guides freeze up easily, making casting difficult. And of course, it is freezing cold.

But hey, nothing ventured, nothing gained! We saw many salmon, but with the season closed we could not fish for them. They were, however, spawning and chances are they would not have paid much attention to flies anyway.

The flies we used were mostly on the small side, around #16 to #20. The fly of choice for the day was a Brassy, with a CDC collar, a tungsten bead and a tail constructed of two strands of golden pheasant tippet. Most of the smaller trout loved it, as did the grayling.

The larger fish we targeted with Glo-bugs, and 5X tippets were the norm, except when we were casting to big fish. I fished a 9ft 5-wt rod with floating line, and from my experiences, if you were to travel with only one outfit, something similar to this will cover most situations when fishing for trout and grayling. I am sure you can fish lighter than this, but you never know when that trophy will swallow the fly.

The Slovenians are very conservation minded and only barbless flies are allowed on all the rivers.

DRIFTING ONTO NIRVANA

As the day drew to a close, I reeled in my line, wiggled out of my waders, packed my stuff and flopped into the passenger seat where the empty tippet spool lay at my feet again. We headed back, the windy road hugging the mountains, through Bled and onto the highway to Ljubljana.

I was tired, but content, and stared blankly at the country through the windscreen — that kind of post-fishing stare when a hundred things race through your mind, but you'd be hard pressed to name one of them.

Rok looked at me from behind the steering wheel and said, "Your mind is empty now."

I asked him to elaborate and he explained his theory that on some days you become so engrossed in the fishing and the flow of water that the rest of your existence drains away, until your mind is empty and only thoughts of fish remain. It's some kind of fishing Nirvana.

I thought about it and had to agree — I had fished my mind empty.

OTHER INFO

- **Guide contact: <www.lustrik.com>**
- **Visas: South Africans need visas, which can only be obtained from the embassies in London or Vienna. London Embassy details are:**
  10 Little College Street, London SW1P 3SJ.
  Tel: 020 7222 5400
  Fax: 020 7222 5277
  http://slovenia.embassyhomepage.com
  It is advisable to phone ahead and make an appointment to see the staff dealing with visas.
  I heard Slovenia is in the process of joining the Schengen visa agreement, but at the time of writing this had not yet happened.
- **Currency: From 1st January 2007 Slovenia adopted the Euro as their unit of currency.**