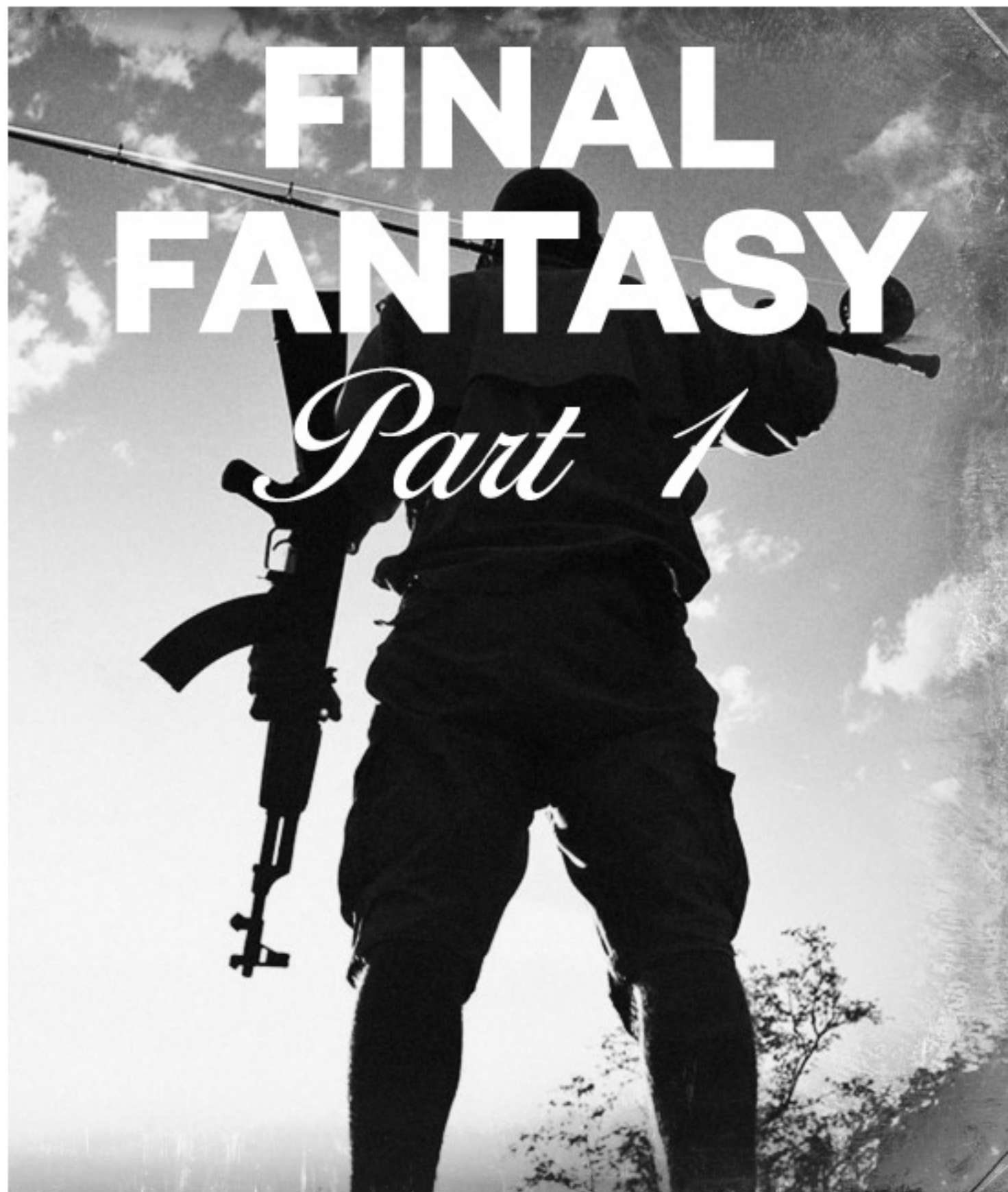




*Words and Photography by FRANCOIS BOTHA Website [www.theflyguides.com](http://www.theflyguides.com)*

Fly-fishing exploration is the thing that dreams are made of. There are precious gamefish to be found in the far corners of the earth, undisturbed by man. It can be a single pursuit for a once in a lifetime moment, or it can be an ongoing love affair for life. I have always dreamed of the goliath tigerfish.



"Hello Francois. With regards to your questions about our rivers and the fishing, I am not a fisherman and nobody has fished the Chinko."... "Yes, it flows clear in the dry season and when I fly over it with my micro light, I can see big silver fish from the air. Regards Erik"

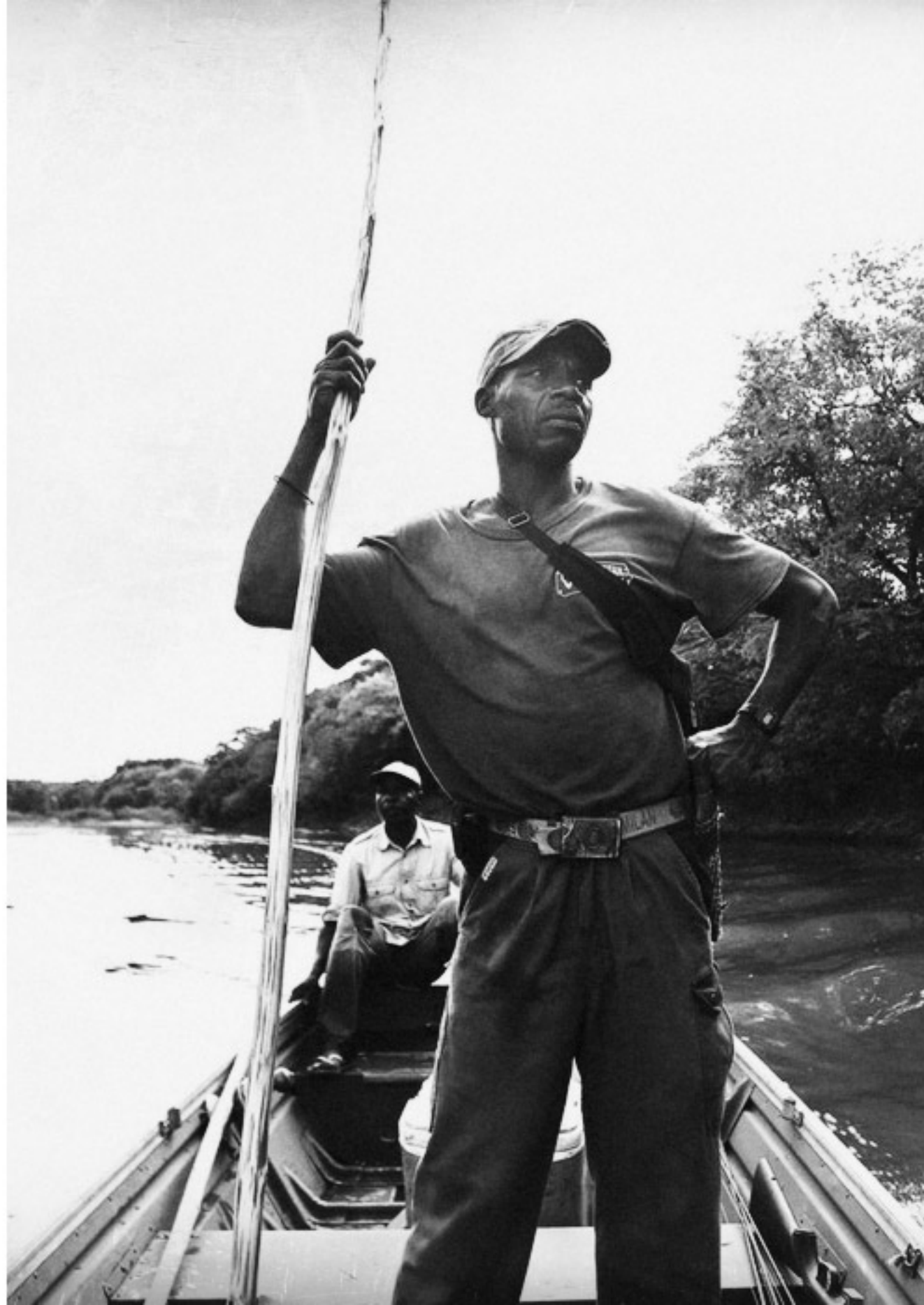
My dreams consist of fly fishing explorations for precious game fish found only in the far corners of the earth. I dream of the goliath tigerfish. This dream had evolved over eighteen years for me, ranging from catching the last of the unexploited game fish on fly, to simply finding where I

might do it. I was good to go the moment I read Eric's reply. My search had led me to a failed African state that was hosting rebel attacks, swarms of killer bees, LRA war criminal, Joseph Kony, and, as soon as possible, me. I wrote my last living will and testament, maxed out every credit card at my disposal, and waited to kiss the tarmac in Bangui, Central African Republic.

Found only in the Congo River and in some of its tributaries, the goliath tigerfish (*hydrocynus goliath*) is a super predator from the heart of Africa. There

Left: Refueling the Cessna 208 at Bangui international airport  
Opposite: The Mbari River seen from the air.  
Little Erik and the mechanic at the Mbari river.  
Notice the make-shift petrol tank.





Opposite: Alphonse, the mighty warrior. If it wasn't for this man I never would have been stayed long enough to find the Goliath. Above: First destination reached – our expedition reaches the Kocho and Chinko confluence.

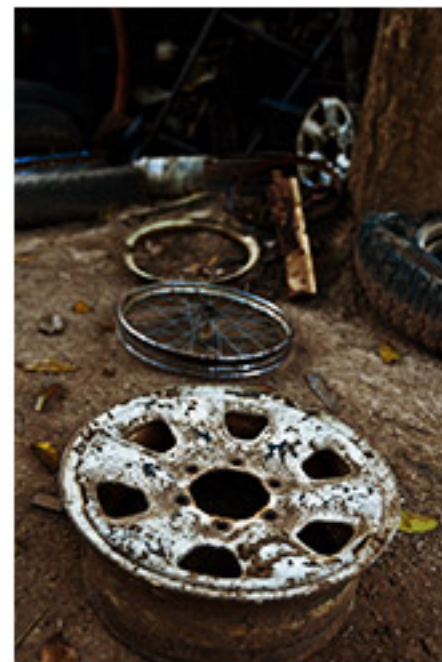
are gruesome rumors that are hard to believe about this fish, but once you see those interlocking dagger-teeth, you will understand why they are so revered. Reputed to be the most difficult of all the game fish to catch, its legendary strength, aggression and giant size makes it the most sought after of the game fish. This mysterious and sophisticated hunter is difficult to entice, virtually impossible to hook, and exhausting to fight long enough to land it. Because the Congo is the second largest river in the world, encounters with this fish are rare and hard to predict. This immense body of water reaches depths of 700 feet, hardly recedes, and

remains chocolate-colored all the time. The Congo River serving as the main highway through Central Africa is fraught with danger, as it is a conveyor belt for nature's destruction.

The days leading up to my trip were marked by trepidation and doubt, due to the volatile situation in Bangui as well as the high cost of the expedition. Jonathan, a good friend, said, "I'm not missing this action," but pulled out after pressure from his family. He pledged to still fund the adventure if I was intent on going, so I remained relatively unaffected regarding the security situation—until I spoke to Rosie Garthwaite, a former front-line reporter and author of *How to Avoid Being*



Left: The Chinko River – you would never suspect what lurks beneath its tranquil waters. Opposite: When the insects come out, they overrun everything. The flying ants are so numerous after the first rains that you can hardly breathe without swallowing one.



Above: Some scenes from the workshop at Kocho Camp. Below: Everything has to go. "Anything you want, we can make" were the words from the workshop manager.

Killed in a War Zone. Her anger was obvious when she asked, "Francois, what are you going to tell your mother when you are kidnapped or returned in a body bag? Is it because the fish were biting?"

Wise words from Rosie, but this was something I had to do. I immediately called Erik to say, "My tickets are booked. Come hell or high water, I am on that plane!"

On the flight to Bangui, I met a doctor from the Netherlands; a peace worker from Sweden, a security officer from the Congo, and a pilot from South Africa, headed to Bangui to offer aid in light of the devastating events that had taken place in the Central African Republic over the past year. No one could believe that I was there for the

fishing. I cautioned to be aware of the refugee camp I would see next to the runway at the International airport. It was indeed a tragic spectacle to behold. There were thousands of people packed like sardines into makeshift houses of corrugated iron and wood, kept separate from the runway by rolls of barbed wire. I stepped off the plane into a surreal experience. The serenity surprised me. In the midst of undeniable hardships, the refugees displayed a bittersweet sense of order and dignity.

Mismah greeted me and with amazing efficiency sorted out my visa, collected my luggage, then led me back onto the runway where my next plane was waiting. David was refueling the Cessna 206

mere meters from the refugee camp fence. I thought about how fly-fishing continually placed me in proximity to extraordinary circumstances on our planet.

We flew for three hours over the ever-changing African savannah and the winding river systems before touching down on another airstrip. This time an encampment of the Ugandan Army bordered the runway. David explained that they, together with US forces, were hunting for Joseph Kony, the infamous leader of the LRA, who they expected to find hiding in the area. One day on the river three thunderous Osprey aircraft droned along the river channel, worrying the treetops with their blades. The installed military presence made it sometimes



feel like we might be in the safest place on earth.

Another hour of driving through beautiful untouched landscape brought us to a camp. This African gem, hidden under a canopy of giant trees along the banks of a river, is a small bustling community of people including professional hunters (PH), scientists, workers, researchers, and the occasional reporter arriving on a motorbike. Everyone is dependent on one another, so this camp had a palpable heartbeat. I had never expected nor witnessed such organization in a remote place. One PH stated there was no such thing as a day off work there. "This is the wild: if you stop, you die."

We were set to explore the Mbari River as soon as the boat arrived. Here we met Little Erik, a young Swedish PH who had reportedly taken down a giant forest hog with a hunter's knife, had spent the last five years of his life in the Chinko bush, and could speak fluent Sango. He would be traveling with us for a bit.

Georgie, who would also accompany us, was once a poacher, is now anti-poacher, and is currently a PH. Every-

one who knows him respects him because his nature simply commands it. This quiet-spoken African trooper carries with him many demons from dead elephants and dead poachers alike. Our life stories paled in comparison.

Our small aluminum boat and a 5-hp Evinrude motor with a makeshift fuel tank finally arrived. It seemed a better choice to go upstream on the Mbari at first, because I was not sure how reliable this little boat would be. It failed a few times in the beginning but Georgie soon mastered the engine the African way in the bush—a methodical tinkering with the choke and gear selector and a loving squeeze of the fuel tank.

The Mbari reminded me a lot of a Bolivian river I know well because of its many twists and turns. Scattered fallen trees interrupted the discolored flow of water. I was worried that the fish would not be able to see the flies through the murky water. Also, this small-sized river did not appear to be the type of water where anything big would be lurking. The Mbari was, however, full of common tigerfish. These terrific game fish populated the river,

chasing down schools of baitfish with spectacular attacks and ferocious commitment.

Little Erik and I were elated to have found such exhilarating fishing, but something nagged at me yet. I had come to find goliath and this tiny river seemed an unlikely place to find one. Furthermore, nobody I had spoken to at the camp—scientists and fishermen alike—had any idea about a goliath. They had gone on to accurately describe this smaller tigerfish, so I found it hard to believe that anyone living with a giant killing fish in their midst would be ignorant of its existence. Then, the outlook turned a bit worse when, on our second night at Mbari, there was a cloudburst and the river came down. Had I arrived too late in the season or had the rains come early?

Explorers and big game hunters know the Chinko River as the home of the big tuskers. It remains a place of dreams where you can still find precious game species hiding in the forests within Central Africa's savannah—the Lord Derby eland, the giant forest hog, Central Africa's savannah buffalo, the forest leopard and the



Left: Road clearing can be hard work, it is amazing to see these African men going about it as if its daily routine. Below: All things weird and wonderful, sometimes you find a rock in the current with excavated sand around it, that when you find these guys. Staple diet. This these fish are family of the commonly known Mberri and they appear in large schools everywhere in the river.



majestic Bongo antelope can all be found there. The Chinko River is the only uninhabited river system in Africa and therefore no information is available about what lives in its waters. One can assume that some of the more than 800 species of fish existing in the Congo have wandered up into its furthest reaches.

A small network of dirt tracks surrounds the main camp of the conservancy. The tracks thin out as they spread toward denser terrain. Africa displays grassy plains with giant anthills scattered like mud huts and thick woodland forest veins grooving through blocks of the savannah. We



Right: A seed/fruit eating fish successfully captured on a streamer pattern near the confluence of the Kocho and Chinko

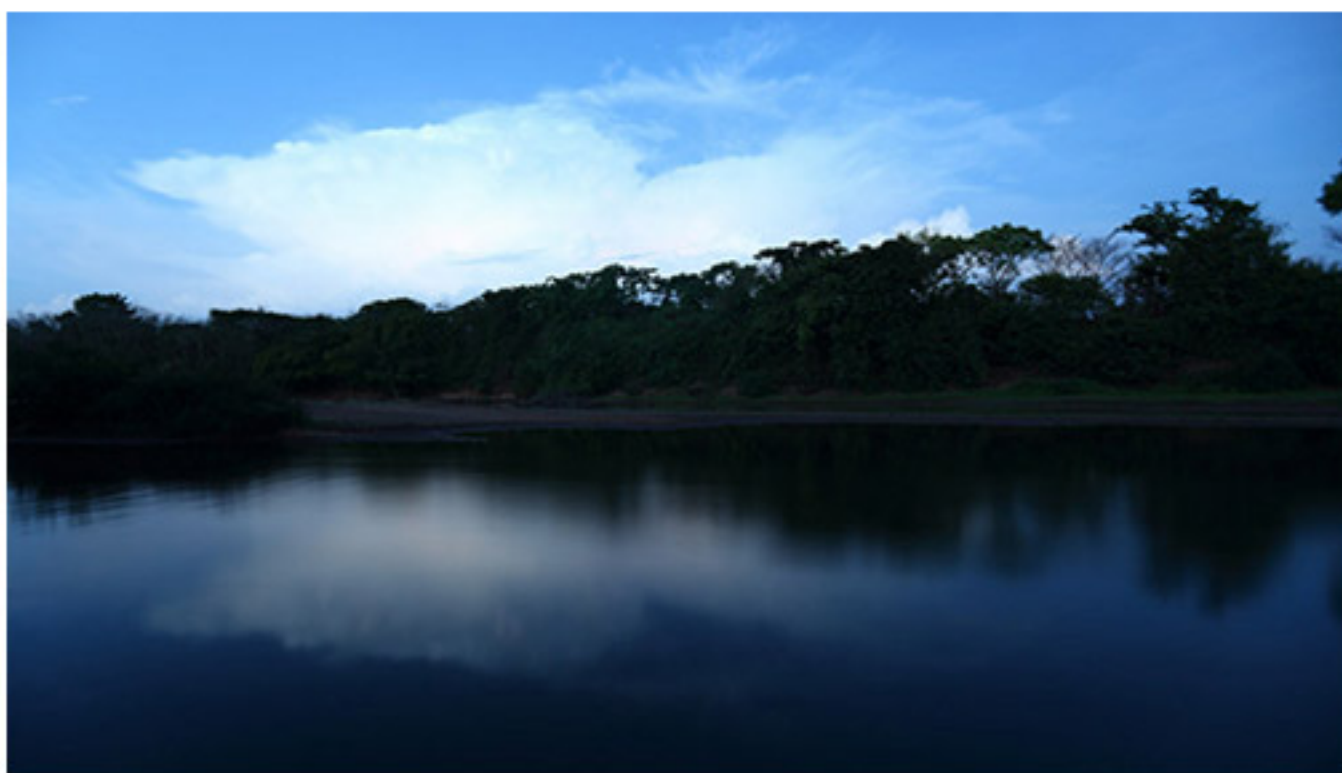


stacked the Landcruiser the African way with a final top load consisting of dangling canisters, chairs and a grill hanging from the boat we perched on the roof. It is here we bid goodbye to Little Erik and I departed with a mechanic, a cook, a worker, Georgie, and a warrior named Alphonse.

We drove until dark and I glimpsed the river under the moonlight when we crossed it. Our camp was set up in a clearing on a high riverbank. In the morning light, I stood astounded looking down at turquoise blue water snaking through a morphological path of sandbars, bedrock pools, and cobbled glides. It was water's heaven—guided by ancient root-baring trees that scaffold the carved vertical banks of islands and grassy plains. I could not imagine such a perfect river. We explored

the shallow clear waters as bow-wakes of countless large fish scattered in all directions when our boat passed over them. There are so many different species of fish! An eccentric collector's aquarium would have labeled them *rare* and *weird*. Some fish made loud drumming sounds that resonated through our aluminum boat as they bolted off—leaving rows of tail puffs in the silt. It turned out that these fish were also prone to eating flies and so the first standoff began. Game on!

We noticed a large fish holding in a shallow cobbled run, which diverted from the rapids into a deep pool. I never would have associated this perfect fly-fishing scene with a river in Central Africa. I took up my 7-weight with floating line and a heavy nymph. It was heart-pounding stuff as I crept up to an accurate



Opposite Clockwise: The end of the road is not the end of the journey. Georgie leads the party through unchartered savannah. A thunderstorm brewing on the horizon.

casting range. The fish seemed to be super spooky to disturbances but the fly plopped and sank in front of him before he ate it. The huge angry carp leapt into the air flashing its red fins and a blue body! It made mincemeat of my 3X leader then leapt over a branch, dove through the rocks, and disappeared into a deep pool. I was already winding in my broken leader.

Alphonse and Georgie exchanged looks and spoke in Sango. What you will understand about living in the bush in Central Africa is that if you do not catch a fish, or shoot something, you go hungry. I had yet to break the catch-and-release concept to my crew. The next morning we went past the same place and the fish had returned too. This time I used a 17-lb fluorocarbon and, to my surprise, the fish ate yet again before it broke me off again in another violent display. My onlookers stood in dismay. They seemed to be arguing and after a few days of hearing Sango, I understood they were complaining about my thin line. Alphonse showed me the hand-line that he used for fishing in those rivers. It could suspend a car from a tree.

I was always under-gunned fishing in that river. We found a deep channel with oyster-covered boulders that stood out like coral bommies. I thought it would be a good place to catch a big catfish and appease my hungry camp. We tied a 120-lb leader to an overhanging tree with a wire trace, circle hook, and a piece of fillet on the end. When we returned an hour later, the line was a pigtailed knot on the tree. The next day I was intent on showing the guys just who was the boss of those fish and I pulled out a vertical jigging stick and a big shiny reel. It took mere minutes before an angry blasting run sent the clicker into banshee-scream mode and I scrambled to the rod. I turned the drag as tight as it would go and engaged. At once, the boat swung around in the direction of the fish and the line tensioned to a high-pitched sound just as my knees hit the gunnel from the power of that fish. Instead of acting like a catfish and staying low, the fish came to the surface to reveal the undeniable hunchbacked profile of the mighty Nile perch!

"Captain!" Alphonse cried, as we all saw the giant fish turn on the surface and thrash down again. Instantaneously it dealt with the leader as it made a charge across the pool, heading straight for the boulders. Adrenalin surged through my body as if I had narrowly escaped death. Africa's other important big game fish, the Nile perch, is in river.

To be continued in the upcoming issue of *This is Fly*.

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Right: Bigger is not always best. There are numerous kapenta in the river and copying them yielded great success. Below: The first Nile perch landed. This was the breakthrough that nearly eluded was it not for a bit of perseverance.

