

Great Smokey Mountain Fish Camp And Safari by Jim Wilson

What does a gourmet restaurateur do to humor himself when he amasses enough capital from selling his five-star restaurants? The answer is, of course, he turns his avocation into his vocation. His avocation being fishing.

Jerry Anselmo, with monies in the bank and ready to spend, was on his way from Hot Springs, Arkansas, to Clemson, South Carolina, with visions of starting an outfitter service in that area. "I got lost along the way and ended up in Franklin, North Carolina," he says with a twinkle in his eyes. He noticed a beautiful river running right through town. According to the sign on one of the bridges, it was the Little Tennessee River. Flowing north, Anselmo drove north on state highway #28, peering at the river whenever it was visible from the road. He drove the 20 some miles where it empties into Fontana Lake within the boundaries of the (Great Smokey Mountains National Park.

A little investigation revealed there were no outfitters on this river. Even though Franklin is a tourist town, he could not find any place to rent a canoe. Finally, someone told him of a friend who might loan him one. Which he did. Anselmo proceeded to float the river with only a handful of lures. Before the end of the day his arm was worn out from catching and releasing dozens of small mouths and a few other varieties of game fish, while never seeing another fisherman.

That's all it took. Jerry started looking for property and purchased four riverside tracts along the route. The properties are spaced four to six miles apart, which allows him to put a variety of shuttle packages together of any length.

I read an article on Jerry's outfitting service on the Little T, written by Jeff Samsel, former editor of W, Va. Game and Fish. The article enticed me enough to book a two-day, one-night float trip starting August 31. In the meantime he sent me copies of articles that had appeared in Bassmaster and Backpacker magazines featuring his outfitting services. My wife, Betty, and I showed up at Jerry's main outpost about noon on the 31st. The outfitters store is unique to say the least. It is at least a 4000 sq. ft, under roof building containing adventures around every corner. Jerry's living quarters are located above. There is a gourmet grocery store across from which is a well-stocked tackle shop. Down the wide hallway is a separate dining and lounging area for persons who rent out his tastefully appointed lodge room. Adorning the walls are framed articles of his, outfitters business, former five-star restaurants and letters from satisfied customers. Probably more meaningful to Jerry are letters from President Clinton, senators, officials from naturalist organizations, praising his conservation of the earth efforts.

Dogs of all breeds and ages roam around his 20-acre main outpost. "Some are mine and others are dropped off by people who know I will find them a good home or take them to the shelter," he says. Several outbuildings on the premises contain dozens of canoes and tubes used for floating the river during the summer months. There is also an RV Campground and tent site on the grounds. Everything is done with an artist's touch, of which he is. "I have this God given gift of being able to duplicate things with little effort. This includes meals I have eaten and things that I've seen," he says without a hint of boastfulness.

Under construction presently is an antique and art gallery across from the lodge room. Well, let's get to fishing. Our van was loaded down with camping gear. The game plan was to start the float trip in mid-afternoon and fish until dark, with Jerry being our guide. A tent had already been set up 5 1/2 miles downriver on one of Jerry's tracts. The next morning Betty and I would fish all day, unguided, and our van would be awaiting us at the take out.

As it is said, the best laid plans of mice and men "oft go awry." (Especially when your wife is involved.) When Betty found out the guest lodge room was available - there went the tent camping. We pushed off in an Old Town canoe from the main outpost at about 3:00 P.M.

The river was devoid of people, save us. This 5 1/2 mile section averaged about 50 feet wide. The current was swift and the river featured a continuous series of flats and rocky shoals. There was just enough color to be conducive for artificial lures. The stretch was also, for the most part, devoid of any signs of civilization with the foothills of the Smokey always in view. One problem we encountered was that the water was just about six inches too low to allow for a smooth float. The serious drought in the mid Atlantic and north-eastern states had also affected this area. The pockets just adjacent to the whitewater that normally hold big fish were too shallow for cover.

The other problem was that we had to portage many of the shoals. We did use these portages as opportunities to wade~fish, which also stretched out our legs. But this led to premature fatigue.

We probably caught and released more smallmouths than we should have that day. Betty used a chartreuse grub exclusively and out fished both Jerry and me. I used a series of Rebel Wee-Crawfish, Tiny Torpedo's and a lead headed plastic silver minnow imitation. The water was too low for the floating- diving crawfish. But t caught a few nice smallies on the others. Jerry spent most of his time paddling and portaging, but managed to catch a couple of nice ones. Betty had a couple of 4 -5 pounders strike at her grub right at the boat, but couldn't set the hook. I had a monster rise for a bug right in front of me in a rapid pool, but couldn't attract her with my imitation minnow.

When we arrived at the take-out near dark, Betty was so tired she couldn't get out of the canoe with- out help. Her legs were gone and she could barely make it to the car. It didn't surprise me when she - muttered over and over again, "NO mas, no mas! " (her version of Roberto Durans infamous words in his prize-fight against Sugar Ray Leonard several years ago. I knew what that meant ...no fishin' the next day. But, what came next made the whole trip worthwhile. We returned to the main outpost and had showers and a Diokol with Diet Coke. A knock came at our door and there was Jerry with what he said was, " Just a little something I threw together for you guys."

It was the best Italian meal I've ever eaten (and not because I was tired and hungry -I know my Italian foods). I couldn't even tell you what was in it other than there was no spaghetti pasta. Betty polished hers off with gusto and doesn't even eat Italian.

The next morning, another knock. A specially blended coffee with two breakfast sandwiches awaited us. The sandwich was on an English muffin with homemade deer/pork sausage (delicious), egg, tomato and - sauce. This was accompanied with fresh fruit and a garnish of fresh flowers. The sandwich didn't look that big, but we never stopped for food the whole 450 miles back home.

The thing that made the trip for Betty was that a bald eagle flew ahead of our canoe almost the whole way. The eagle turned out to be a pretty darn good fisherman, flying away with lunker bass on more than one occasion. I would highly recommend this outfitter service for anyone who loves the great outdoors and enjoys doing worthy battle with the mighty bronzeback. The scenery is spectacular and the fees are modest. Jerry Anselmo can tailor your trip to meet your own desires and pocketbooks... --and do it with gracious, professional style.

I know I'll be back -when the water level is at least six inches higher. More expansion plans are being contemplated. Jerry would like to build cabins on the three downriver tracts in order to give customers the option of luxury versus tent camping. I know which option my wife would choose. Jerry's season is from April to December. Then he is off to Costa Rica to test the waters and the food offered there. Maybe even finding a Mrs. Anselmo to share his lifestyle. But his heart and soul will remain in the foothills of the Smoky's on the Little T. This is his third full year of operation.

"I am doing things at my own pace and my own way," says the 53-year- old bachelor with a visionary gleam. You may contact Jerry by writing: G.S.M.F.C. & S., 81 Bennett Road. Franklin, NC 26734 or call (828) 369-5295. Professional fishing guide service; one and two day trips. Camp on the river. We set up your camp with wonderfully prepared gourmet lunches and dinners. Bike runs along the river, bike and canoe rentals. Our R V and camp sights along the river are beautiful. Hiking maps and info of our area. Waterfall tours with lunch. Come fish, float, hike, bike, camp, with us.

