

THE GLITTER of a forest in winter beckons a team of 13 guns visiting Croatia for the first time to shoot driven wild boar. They hail either from Yorkshire or, like their captain Philip Rhodes, from Lancashire, and the white rose men, say that Rhodes could almost pass for one of them, he's that good. Booking the trip 10 months previously, Rhodes made it clear to the Folkestone-based Lasarotta sporting agency that his team does not hunt in fenced areas. Each gun has paid an all-inclusive fee of £2,640 for four days' sport and a possible bag of 100 boar. Ten of them are highly experienced and recently broke an area record in Hungary by shooting 89 boar in three days.

Rhodes is on his peg for the first drive, a .410 cartridge-belt around his waist but with a side-by-side Chapuis Armes double rifle 9.3x74R at the ready. "I can detach the 'scope and shoot open sights," he says, and that's a plus in a sport that demands fast, instinctive shooting. Rhodes is match-fit. He recently went native in Mongolia, riding fleet-footed ponies to shoot ibex together with Joe Wilcock, Ken Brown and Brendan Woods who are in the line today. Anticipation plus the opportunity to shoot a big rifle at a running target easily create an addiction. "We go twice a year when we can. It's the sheer thrill of hearing them rushing through the trees, especially on a crisp, frosty morning like this."

The Homeland War wreaked devastation on Croatia's famous forests, but a centuries-long tradition of forestry management here in the Vinkovci Administration facilitated a rapid and celebrated recovery. This is significant since tourism underpins Croatia's economy and, in consequence, boar-shooting is heavily regulated to sustain numbers. During the four-hour drive east from Zagreb airport the day before, the Lasarotta representative drew the attention of photographer Laurence Squire and myself to the distinctions between fenced and unfenced driven wild-boar shooting. The quarry is shot either in completely open areas or within very large fenced areas into which it is directed a few days before the hunt to guarantee numbers. "You don't see fences anywhere," he says of the second set-up, "but you know they are there. It is more intensive, and this is something more natural for people from the UK because they like to shoot a big amount of boars in short amount of time. We can move guns here and there, organising four or five drives. It is more commercial – but not really the best." Based in England, although a Serb, he claims the British believe boar-shooting is a sport "for people with no money. But it's the top of the game, like grouse. An advanced sport, really difficult." Ninety per cent of his company's UK clients are taken to closed areas to cut down on complaints from shooters with false expectations. And tomorrow? "We will go for intensive boar-shooting," he says.

After a six-hour delay getting their guns through customs at Belgrade airport, the team finally joined us at the hunting lodge where they were to stay. Everyone was hungry and tired. After supper the photographer and I were driven away to the first of our allotted resting-places. Next morning, on parade at 6.20, looking forward to breakfast and the first day's action, we were returned to the lodge where the Lasarotta rep, our host, took me to task for being insufficiently effusive when greeting the guns the night before. Squire, reprimanded for something else, said ►



**Boar-hunting addict:**  
the match-fit team  
captain Philip Rhodes



# Rather hairy *wild boar*

A British team finds plenty of driven wild boar in Croatia though much of the quarry is fenced. However, Elizabeth Walton balks at some Balkan practices. Photographs by Laurence Squire



Another one in the bag; fast, instinctive shooting is required to fell boar



L to r: Peter Thomas; Brendan Woods, who had never seen "so many small pigs"; the gun "bus"



perhaps the two of us were trapped in Morrissey's comeback album, *You Are The Quarry*. Four of the team had found their beds in "a rickety old shed with no central heating across the garden". Were they angry? Just a bit.

Back in the forest with Rhodes, the boom of distant rifle fire signals action for several guns along the line. The wild boar's keen intelligence and sense of smell compensate for poor eyesight. A mature sow leads the herd, determining its speed and direction of travel. If she turns back through the beaters there is nothing to shoot, so our team must be still, silent and deadly. We borrow the German noun *Keiler* for a mature male, and he moves in splendid isolation at a more sedate pace. He may approach the line when the beaters are far away, sniff the air, listen, proceed forward, equidistant between two guns and vanish like Houdini.

Before this team began shooting boar, its members were experienced shotgun shooters and stalkers and were thus familiar with moving targets and with rifles, which explains their

success. On the second drive, I see my first pig (they're always "pigs"), which is a surprisingly difficult thing to do: thank God I'm not shooting. I'm up on a stand this time, with Peter Thomas who's shot big game in Africa for 30 years; at Knoydart just last week he got 15 red deer. When four pigs materialise among the trees, he gets one. "What was wrong with the other three?" asks David Tunnicliffe, who chuckles at the assessment of the escapees. "When the adrenalin gets going, it's the biggest boar that's ever been seen, the size of a carthorse." Because a bullet expands on entry, its exit leaves a trail of blood that enables a marksman to track and despatch a wounded animal. The beaters reward a kill with an oak twig for the gun's hatband.

This is lowland shooting; imagine the Fens and it's flatter. Forestry is Tunnicliffe's business and he can read the ruler-straight oaks and hornbeam like a book. The only birdsong is the deep, rumbling croak of acrobatic ravens; the predators, including eagles, have taken over.

Experienced boar-shooters are accustomed to three drives of 90 minutes, which explains why the team carries vacuum flasks and snacks. In contrast, today's drives evoke "a pheasant day" for Tunnicliffe, his 6ft 5in frame essaying invisibility in head-to-toe camouflage. "We wear all this fancy gear," he muses, "and stand out a mile. The pigs wear dark brown and we can't see them." This doesn't stop him shooting one in front and one behind. Woods kills six with his Blaser .30-06, reporting: "They were coming past three abreast; I've never seen so many small pigs. It was like a conveyor belt."

Irrepressible, James England reports getting his "smack in the forehead". The bag is 39, to which Julian Fenton of Studley Royal fame contributes five with his .375 H&H Magnum Proctor rifle. His summing up is lugubrious and succinct. "Mr Piggy's had a very rough day," he says. During the traditional closing ceremony, Alex Lewis and Guy Butler, boar virgins until today, are commanded to



**Left: an intriguing way of being blooded**  
**Above: the guns take lunch in the forest**



**L to r: preparing for the closing ceremony;**  
**“Boss Pig” James England; Dachbracke hound**



drape themselves over a beast each while the seasoned campaigners stripe them with a freshly cut switch. “Don’t worry,” Thomas calls out. “It’s all in the price.”

The euphoria evaporates when Rhodes has a daily limit sprung on him. This is impossible to implement; how would the guns communicate with each other? Exceeding the limit will mean paying for extras in tranches of 20, not incrementally. With so many disappointments, tension is mounting. On day two, the team does not see as many pigs because the previous drives are repeated. “It’s not sporting,” says Fenton, naming these fenced days “Weaner Parks 1 & 2.” Robert Jolly, one of the country’s finest grouse-shots and passionate about dangerous game, dubs it “Mickey Mouse.” Paul Moore says he might have found more satisfaction staying home in Sweden to watch the wild boar on his own land. Everyone appreciates the hunting department’s need for seasonal quotas, but the problems exasperate Rhodes who sighs: “And this was meant to be a holiday...”

At the Kujnjak hunting ground Branko Urošević, an alpha male if ever I saw one, rides to the rescue. Although the prescribed daily limits rein the guns in, there are 800 hectares of open shooting with varied drives for the final two days. For the last drive of all, I’m high on a hill with Peter Wilkinson who owns a hunting and game lodge in South Africa’s Limpopo Province and is thus the most experienced rifle shot in the line. “You can be my spotter,” he says. No other gun is visible; beaters and dogs are far distant. The rain drips down on to a carpet of beech leaves, their colour a perfect backdrop against which to pick out a *Keiler* trotting nonchalantly along a high ridge, safely out of range and ignoring the Dachbracke hounds trailing in his wake.

Croatia’s sporting potential is boundless, and its hospitality exemplary. The guns’ stoicism is legendary (so Jolly says), and their company a joy. It’s a rare treat to see such accomplished shooters in the field, and Urošević volunteers that their ability and discipline are

impressive. Jolly is “Boss Hog” (most kills), England is “Boss Pig” (biggest boar). The kill ratio is 2.6:1 and the bag 116. They each stump up a further €500 before heading for Belgrade with kit crammed shoulder-high in the bus because the trailer’s been cancelled. On the way to Zagreb airport our driver is falling asleep. Squire takes the wheel, and when the driver revives he mimes to Squire to slow down; we’re using too much fuel. An email from the Lasarotta rep follows me home. Elucidating my faults, it includes the phrase, “I never benefit from reporter.” Really? I wonder why. ■

#### **DRIVEN BOAR IN CROATIA**

The cost depends on the estimated bag regardless of sex, weight and trophy value. For groups of eight to 18 guns the cost of 16 to 20 wild boar is £699 per day per gun. The cost of 21 to 25 wild boar is £799 per day per gun. Season, November to January. Tel 01344 457052, [www.lasarotta.co.uk](http://www.lasarotta.co.uk).