

Keeping faith with DH Lawrence – an interview with Oliver Rampley



Oliver Rampley read English Language & Literature at Lincoln in 2003. After seven years working in London, Oliver decided to pursue his passion for nature full-time. He has since launched Altana Europe, organising tailor-made fishing and birdwatching trips in Italy and Spain.

Can you tell us about your current job and the projects you are working on?

I run a business called Altana Europe that creates experiences based around fishing, birdwatching and conservation management. In Italian, an 'altana' is a high seat or stand from which one watches wildlife. Used figuratively, an 'altana' signifies a vantage point, or in architecture refers to a private loggia characteristic of Venice.

We're HQ-ed in San Niccolò in Florence, and much of our work takes place across Tuscany or Andalusia in Spain.

I spend about half the year in the field with clients, working as a fishing or birdwatching and wildlife guide. The rest of the time I oversee the running of the business and visit new sites for future trips. I also spend three weeks of the year on press trips with journalists.

In terms of current projects, last week I was on a site visit in the Dolomites in South Tyrol, and now I'm in East Lothian in Scotland looking at collaborating with the Lammermuirs Moorland Group around birdwatching. Yesterday I shadowed a gamekeeper on a

managed grouse moor, learning about a conservation method called 'diversionary feeding' that is used to protect birds of prey such as peregrine falcon and goshawk. At the end of the month, I go to Andalusia in Spain for two weeks of bird and ibex watching, then to Yellowknife in Canada to (hopefully) see wolves hunt caribou.

What made you want to move to Florence?

In many ways, I ended up in Florence thanks to my professor at Lincoln, Stephen Gill. As an undergraduate reading English, I worked on DH Lawrence's time in Italy and Stephen kept a weather eye on it all. The week after my Finals I got into a conversation with the historian Andrew Beaumont, who was Junior Dean of Lincoln at the time, about walking from Venice to Rome to partially retrace Lawrence's footsteps. I ran the idea past Stephen, and the following year I left St Mark's Square on foot for a formative adventure that lasted four months. I spent time in Florence on the way and the city captured my imagination. I promised myself I'd live there one day, and I relocated five years ago. In the months before the walk, I exchanged letters with

Stephen, and my circumstances now all trace back to that period. I remember Stephen writing me to 'keep faith with DHL', as well as a coda that read, 'Italy - sunshine, tomatoes, girls'.

Tell us about some of your most exciting collaborations.

My business partner is the chef Mark Hix, so I'm lucky to do a lot of fun work with Mark and other chefs. Mark was head chef at London restaurants including Scott's, Le Caprice, J. Sheekey and The Ivy, and went on to open his own restaurants and a hotel. His reputation as a chef and writer is based on a focus on provenance and sustainability, underpinned by a profound personal connection with the outdoors. Mark became a partner because my values as a guide and his as a chef overlapped, and because he loves fishing. We've consequently had many adventures. Last year we worked off the Argentario peninsula in Tuscany, demonstrating how to target European barracuda and then preparing sashimi and ceviche on a boat. On another trip we stalked wild boar in the Alps of the Moon in Umbria and then Mark created four boar curries. On cooking-centric trips like that, I lead a technical and tutorial

📍 *Fly fishing in the historic centre of Florence at sunset. Altana Europe's fishing trips under the Ponte Vecchio made the front page of the Financial Times in 2014.*

📍 *Ollie leading clients to see Great Spotted Cuckoo and Glossy Ibis at the Oasi di Burano wetlands in Tuscany in collaboration with the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF)*

introduction to the fieldcraft involved and principles of selective management hunting as part of conservation, then Mark steps in to do demonstrations of seam butchery and knife skills, and then obviously there's lots of cooking (and wine). We're doing demonstrations and talks on wild boar at two of the larger UK food festivals this month.

I've also been lucky to spend time on location in Italy with other British chefs including Angela Hartnett, protégé of Gordon Ramsey, and Fergus Henderson, founder of St. John in London (once named best restaurant in the world). Last week in the Dolomites, my team was with two Michelin-starred Italian chef Norbert Niederkofler, learning how to forage for wild edible Alpine flowers.

What was the inspiration behind starting the company Altana Europe?

Altana evolved naturally rather than due to a causal moment of inspiration. I started from scratch as an independent fly fishing and coarse fishing guide five years ago, and this developed into a small business. I was occasionally taking friends and clients referred by local hotels to see birds in Florence's private and public historic gardens, and then I started to get calls from the UK about creating weekends around that. I started looking at sites on the coast and realised that there was no one coherently offering a guiding service for fishing or birdwatching in Italy. I'd also become interested in wild

boar and been studying and following the discourse on the species in Europe, and I published a few articles in Italy and England. I was subsequently asked to sit on an advisory panel on boar put together by Pol Roger, and this led to calls from wildlife photographers and specialist hunters. At this point, I decided to string the three elements together under one holistic brand.

What is different about your trips to a typical eco-holiday?

I wouldn't describe our trips as eco-holidays, as I think that implies something scaleable and pre-packed in dull way. I hope that what differentiates us is the depth of experience, and we achieve that by just focusing on three elements: location, expertise and narrative. We work in the most dramatic and uniquely beautiful locations we can find, we provide truly expert guiding and instruction in the field, and we house everything in a narrative about local culture that italicizes the overall experience when we're not standing in a river or sitting in a bush.

Aside from Stephen Gill's influence, how else did your time at Lincoln affect your career trajectory?

Certain texts I studied at Lincoln had a lot of impact on the past fifteen years,

especially when it came to taking difficult decisions about what I should be prioritising, and I think I was as much influenced by the lives of two or three of the writers I studied as the works I read. The teaching, both at Lincoln and other colleges, helped me to reason that it is very possible to try and create a working reality for one's self - i.e. assess what you love to do most, what your strong abilities are, where you most like to be in order to be happiest, and make a composite of those elements that also pays all the inevitable bills. Working towards that is sometimes scarily stressful, and I think that being able to hold my nerve is a vital skill that Oxford developed.

You originally left a career in London to pursue fishing – what advice would you give to people who want to turn a passion or hobby into a career?

Learn how to make a strong gin-and-tonic, then go for it. The worst that can happen is failure, and that's relative. The most surprising and inspiring days in the last five years have all been on trips with clients, and on top of that I met the love of my life in a meeting about wild boar, so I'm deeply grateful for a good attitude towards risk. ■

Find out more at www.altanaeurope.com



Sus scrofa scrofa - the central European wild boar. Ollie has become an expert on the behaviour and management of this misunderstood species

