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TEXT HUON HOOKE

ON THE FLY



Experience some of the best fly-fishing in the world, as Huon Hooke takes a line on Owen River Lodge in the Nelson Lakes region of New Zealand's South Island. Just a short cast from Marlborough, good times and great wines await.

"Strike! ... STRIKE!! ... What is it about the word 'strike' that you do not understand?" The mouth screaming these words is a few centimetres from my left ear.

I yank the rod tip and just about rip my right arm from its socket.

The fly line whips up into the clear blue New Zealand sky and lands harmlessly in the clear blue water behind me.

I'm pleading fatigue. It's my only defence. It's been a frustrating day fly-fishing the Buller River and the defects in my casting style (what style?) have been revealed for the world to see. Or at least for my companion Howard and our fishing guide Little Steve.

The fish is still hanging in the current about 10 metres ahead. I'm exhausted after hours of walking, bush-bashing, wading through strong currents, and scrambling over stony river banks under a hot cloudless early-December sky. The guide is right and I am wrong. I need to practise hard on my casting. If you can't land the fly 40 to 50 centimetres in front of the fish's nose, and almost straight ahead of it, you don't have much chance of catching it. These trout are spoilt bastards: they have numberless pristine rivers teeming with insect life in which to frolic, conditions that result in New Zealand having the best brown trout fishery in the world. This is trout fly-fisherman's paradise: within an hour's drive of Owen River Lodge, where we're staying, there are 23 rivers like this, not one of whose equal do we have in Australia. Indeed, fly-fishing is like snow-skiing in that

with both, New Zealand is in a completely different league from Australia.

And it's largely 'sight fishing' – you find the fish then cast to it, rather than blindly fishing in any likely looking stretch of water. That makes it very exciting, and more like hunting than most forms of fishing.

The guide has stomped on ahead in search of another fish. I wonder how these guys, who are expert fishermen themselves, manage to retain their composure in the face of such appalling ineptitude. I guess being paid helps.

I summon my friend Howard, saying, "You have a go. I give up. This fish is yours if you can get it."

Howard, who is much more practised than I, puts a nymph and a woolly strike-indicator on his six-pound leader, and swish, swish goes the nine-foot rod, and he succeeds in placing the cast nicely. The fish takes the fly and the battle begins. After a lot of stumbling and swearing as the fish swims first upstream, then down, and a fair bit of patience, there's a fat three-and-a-half pound brown in the net.

Howard is apologetic. "That was your fish," he generously offers.

"It would have been, had I been able to catch it," I reply, "but I couldn't catch a cold."

The tired fish is back in the water, swimming away. It will sulk for a day or so but recover and be back in the current, happily sucking in mayfly nymphs, soon enough.

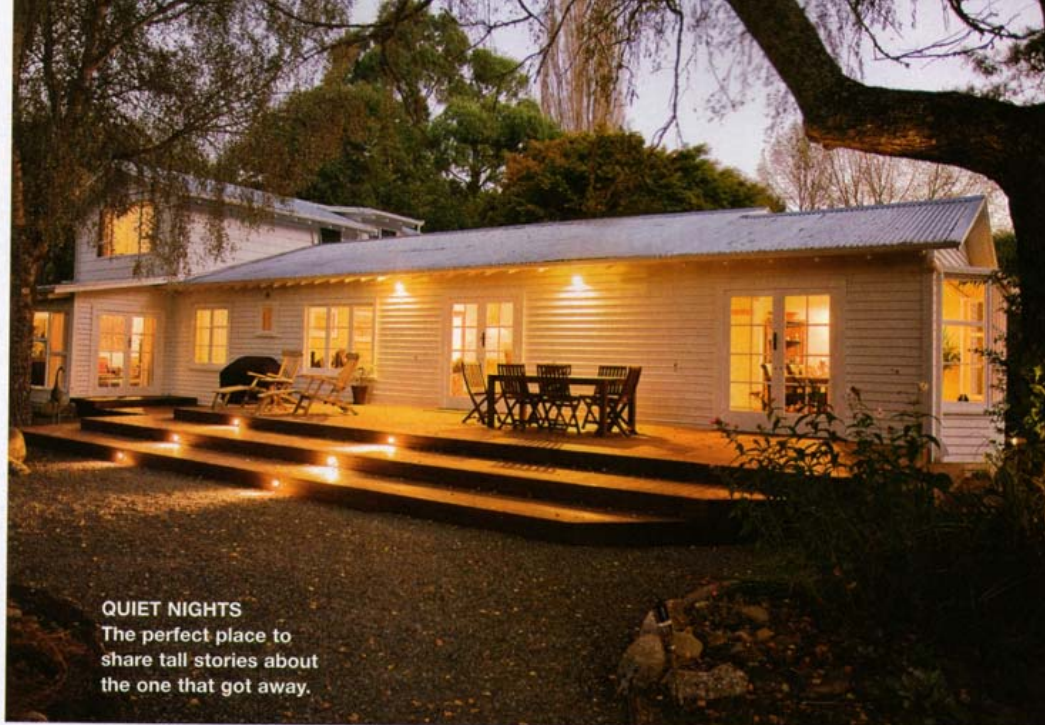
Steve is a terrific guide: hard-working, energetic, sharp as a new fish-hook and apparently gifted with x-ray vision. He strides

on ahead at a pace we cannot match, despite the fact he's doing two things at once: walking – or wading – and searching the water. When he spots a fish, he stops dead still, like a hunting dog, his head forward, his nose probing the air. All he lacks is a tail and a raised forepaw, and he'd be a Pointer.

The body language says it all. He stops suddenly, then slowly, quietly, takes several steps backwards, till he's sure he's well out of the fish's field of vision. When we eventually catch up, he uses a rod-tip to point to the water where the fish is lying. At first, neither of us can see anything. It all looks like water with rocks underneath. To complicate it, the rocks are all different sizes and tones, actually a very pretty array of colours from various shades of white to yellows and browns. Ripples on the surface complicate the picture further, as do shadows. Then we see it: a dark torpedo shape, with its head and tail in line as it lies almost motionless, facing directly into the current. We watch. And hold our breaths. Occasionally we can see the tail move slightly. Every few minutes it shifts sideways a few centimetres, opens its mouth to let a morsel of food slide in, then glides back to its holding position. It's feeding. Hanging in a favoured place where the current is not so strong as to require the expenditure of much energy, it waits as the flow of water brings food to its mouth. It rarely moves more than a body-width for a passing insect.

In our polarised sunglasses the fish is a delicate yellowy-green. This, and its black





QUIET NIGHTS
The perfect place to share tall stories about the one that got away.

shadow on the riverbed (if the sun is out) distinguish it from the background. Spotting fish is easier in full sun, partly because of the fish's shadow, partly because we can see into the water more clearly.

I move into position again, close by Steve's right shoulder, nervous of making yet another stuff-up. This time there's a noticeable breath of breeze directly behind me: I compensate by making a shorter, brisker back-cast, and then allowing the wind to carry the forward cast, gently wafting the fly onto the water. It lands half a metre ahead of the fish and about 20 centimetres to its right. I see the fish clearly as it darts to the right and opens its mouth. In my excitement, I lift the rod tip and pull the fly out of the fish's mouth. "Bugger!" I mutter. I ruined a certain take.

"Did I say 'Strike'?" asks Steve.

"Sorry," I whine pathetically. The fish, thoroughly spooked, has swum away and the opportunity is lost.

Owen River Lodge is fly fishing's best kept secret. It's a small lodge, sleeping just 12 clients in six en-suite units, and is dedicated

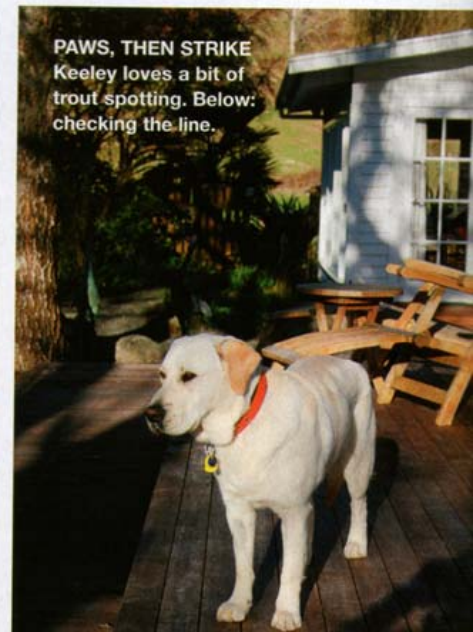
to fly fishing. Owned by Felix Borenstein, a refugee from the Melbourne IT world, where he had a recruitment business, it is truly comfortable accommodation – bordering on luxury – with three-course dinners cooked by chefs every evening and a small but very good wine list, plus cooked English breakfasts. At NZ\$490 (A\$365) per person per night – twin share, it's not cheap, but it is excellent value.

Borenstein has a good range of rods and reels, boots and waders – in short, everything you require. No need to take your own tackle: indeed, it's better not to take rods back and forth between Australia and New Zealand because they have a dreaded water-weed that we don't have, called didymo. Fishermen take all precautions not to spread it, including disinfecting our footwear every day.

You can fish by yourself or hire a guide. Most clients hire a guide, at least for part of their stay. Time is valuable, and you need someone with local knowledge to take you to the best sections of the best rivers. Even guides from elsewhere hire a local guide.

Unless you're an expert, you'll find a guide will be the difference between catching the odd small fish and catching plenty of good fish. I managed 17 in five days, my biggest being a six-and-a-half pounder and most between three and five pounds. A good guide can see fish where you and I would never see them, and tell you exactly how to cast your fly. And Owen River Lodge has 11

PAWS, THEN STRIKE
Keeley loves a bit of trout spotting. Below: checking the line.



of them on its books, and if they're all as good as Little Steve, they are well worth hiring. I wouldn't consider not hiring one, even at NZ\$735 (A\$547) a day. It makes sense to share a guide, as it's the same price if two of you hire him.

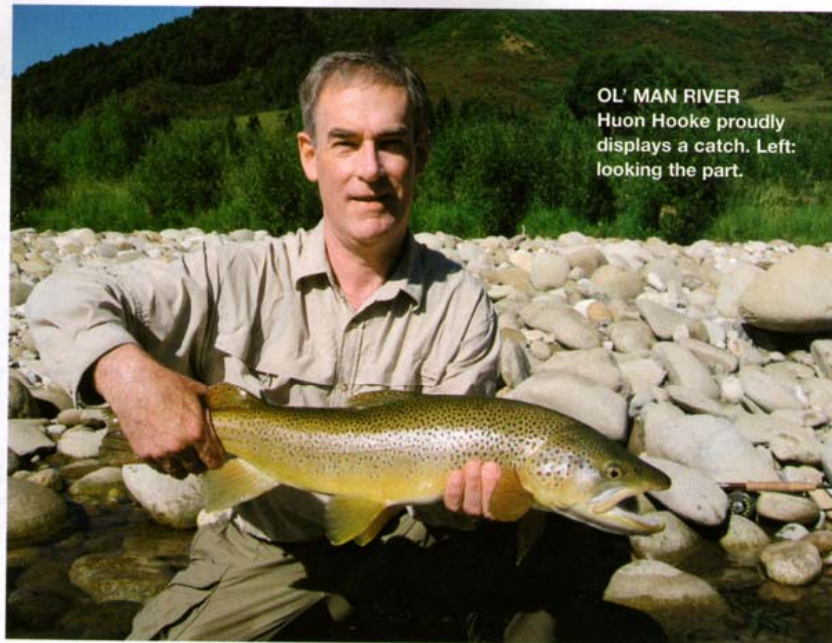
Owen River Lodge is truly "getting away from it all". It's in a fairly remote area near Murchison, about a 90-minute drive south of Nelson and an hour west of the Marlborough wine region. And no: not a single drop of Marlborough sauvignon blanc passed my lips the entire week. Various other more interesting En-Zed wines did, though, such as 2007 Fromm La Strada Chardonnay, 2008 Craggy Range Gimblett Gravels Syrah and 2006 Ata Rangi Pinot Noir – all off the lodge's wine list.

But the most exciting feature of Owen River Lodge is the water you can fish, and the lack of competition from other anglers. The rivers are mostly medium-sized, of wade-able depth, and moderately fast-flowing, although the volume of water depends on the season, and when I visited in late 2010 there'd been no rain for a long time and the rivers were low, by their standards. The sheer volume of trout-fishing water in New Zealand is extraordinary, and makes fishing there compared to Australia a bit of a no-brainer. When a Sydney-Christchurch return airfare is A\$430, why would you go anywhere else?

We fished a different river each day, and only once was there any evidence that other people had fished there within a week of us. We saw fresh footprints. We were 'skunked' that day: the fish were wary and hard to catch. Elsewhere, we felt as though we were on uncharted waters. Contrast that with Australia, where you usually share the bank with a mob of other fishermen.

Consequently, New Zealand rivers have more fish and much bigger fish than Australia. At home, a two-pounder is a good-sized fish.





OL' MAN RIVER
Huon Hooke proudly displays a catch. Left: looking the part.

In New Zealand, a three or four-pounder is a good fish and six and seven pounders are quite plentiful. Ten-pounders are caught fairly regularly – often fattened on mice.

Borenstein bought the lodge in rundown condition as a small guesthouse in 2003, then renovated it, turning it into a genuine resort. It earns the maximum five-star rating with Qualmark, the New Zealand accommodation rating agency. The clientele is roughly 40 per cent American, 40 per cent Australian and 20 per cent other, mostly English.

One-third of guests are repeat customers. Most are in the 55- to 70-year age-group, and a cross-section of people, but mostly well-off professionals. They include a US Supreme Court judge and one of America's richest men, who flies in by private jet. Most are men but some are women.

"Some come as part of a tour of New Zealand, some do the vineyards, play golf, hire a Harley," says Borenstein. "Most bring a rod and reel and borrow waders and boots: they are heavy so why bother to pack them in your luggage? We have 51 pairs of boots from small ladies through to XXXL. We have to have lots of boots in case we get 12 people with big feet."

Some are oncers, just after experiences. Some come back every year.

The main thing about Owen River Lodge is that everything is quality, from the super-soft bedding to the menu (spring New Zealand whitebait, anyone?). And yes, the espresso coffee is excellent.

Borenstein had been coming to New Zealand to fly fish for six years before buying the lodge. He loves the sport, is a very competent fisherman himself, and after many visits, and disillusionment with business in Melbourne, decided to take the plunge and make his hobby his life.

What was it about New Zealand fishing that got him in?

"New Zealand has a mythical quality for fishermen because of the size of the trout and the clarity of the water," he says. "In 2001 I had a memorable time on the Matataki River. I landed an 11¾ pound trout and a 12½ pounder." Borenstein was hooked.

Does managing a lodge leave him time to fish very often?

"I still fish most weeks. It depends on whether guests are coming. Recently I was away from the lodge for only an hour, and just up the road I caught three fish on dry flies within half an hour. I did three perfect casts. Life was good that day."

On our final day, fishing the Owen River, Howard caught his biggest fish, seven-and-a-half pounds, and so did I – six-and-a-half pounds. A perfect day, cloudless but mild, virtually no wind. And I got my revenge...

me. The challenge then is to take up the slack fast, keeping pressure on the hook, otherwise the fish can easily spit it out. He tore past me down-river. Normally, clambering over boulders is slow and treacherous work, but with a nice fish on the line, I suddenly became a ballet dancer, leaping Nureyev-like from rock to rock as I chased the fish down-river. I somehow managed not to fall over, and to keep the fish on, and eventually landed a healthy four-pounder.

After a fishless day dinner conversation can be flat. But that evening, the tall fishing tales came thick and fast. Dinner began with nibbles at the bar, moving to the table with its stunning view of the river and mountains beyond, for seafood bisque with prawns, followed by roast venison on risotto with asparagus, and crème brûlée for dessert. The

Fly-hooks and bushes have a magnetic attraction, especially when there's a trout directly beneath.


Howard had been a casting fruitlessly to a nice-sized trout. It was in a classic lie: a metre out from the opposite bank, sheltered by an overhanging bush, not an easy cast because of the vegetation. Fly-hooks and bushes have a magnetic attraction, especially when there's a trout directly underneath. Howard had probably made 20 casts at this critter and it hadn't shown any interest.

He said, "I give up; you have a go."

Using a slight sideways action, I wafted a cast into the nook, and it was almost perfect.

"Strike!" and wham, I was on, and the rod flexed into a U-shape. Some fish give up easily, others fight like the Taliban, and it has little relation to size. This feller took off like an All Black with 'roid rage. They usually go upstream but he came bolting down towards

menu from the night before was braised pork belly with scallops; duck breast on spinach; and chocolate cake. The Craggy Range Syrah was breathtakingly good, and it is always fun to watch Australians tasting a great Gimblett Gravels shiraz for the first time. What more could anyone want? Fine food and lovely wine, the inner glow of satisfaction after a hard but successful day in the great outdoors, and if the conversation isn't riveting, that's your own fault – take some mates with you.

And when the fish eventually bite, don't forget to strike. 

For more details on Owen River Lodge, visit www.owenriverlodge.co.nz. The river fishing season at the top of the South Island is October 1 to April 30.