

10 DESTINATION AFLOAT THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN, JANUARY 16-17, 2016
www.theaustralian.com.au/travel



Come fly with me

New Zealand's Wairau River is trout-fishing paradise

RICK WALLACE

One minute they are there and the next they aren't — three of the biggest brown trout imaginable cruising the aquamarine waters of a deep pool in New Zealand's Wairau River. One is at least 12lb (5.4kg, but fly-fishing weights and lengths are measured in the imperial system) and the others not far behind. All are feeding close to the surface and thus, in theory, are catchable.

Owen River Lodge is about 100km from Nelson on the South Island and its owner, Felix Borenstein, says this is fly-fishing's Everest. I don't know it yet, but I am about to be taken out by the equivalent of an avalanche before even reaching base camp. As I move down from the elevated position above the river to make my cast, a rock dislodged by my foot rolls loose. It doesn't crash into the water but lands with a solid crack on a rock further below. Alerted by the vibrations, the leviathan browns I have been stalking flit away into the depths and I am left to contemplate the many ways you can lose your shot at the fish of a lifetime.

"It's the pinnacle of brown trout fishing in the world," Borenstein says back at the lodge over a glass of riesling from the local Neudorf Vineyards. "We don't have big numbers of fish, but those we do have are as big as you'll find."

The night I arrive at Owen River Lodge, two American brothers have smashed the lodge record with a 12lb trout and 14lb monster taken on the same day. Over a delicious communal dinner of kingfish sashimi and duck breast, they show off pictures snapped before releasing these beautiful creatures back into the tumbling blue waters. With expectations running high, all guests retire early ahead of a full day's fishing.

The goal for the guides is to avoid coming home without catching a fish. There is also a lot of personal chemistry; Borenstein has to juggle to pair the right guide with the right angler. In recognition of my comparatively tender age (by fly-fishing standards) I am matched with a hard-charging Kiwi, whereas others are paired with guides more suited to their physical capacities. For the uninitiated, fly fishing involves trying to fool trout with



imitations of their prey, which are generally made from feather, fur and foam. In the clear waters of New Zealand, the technique is to first spot your quarry, determine what it is feeding on and then cast the imitation within about 30cm of the fish and hope it eats it.

Misplaced casts, falling rocks and sudden movements are punished ruthlessly with the wary fish fleeing to deeper water at the first hint of being stalked. A good day on these rivers typically sees the angler spot 15 to 25 trout, cast to perhaps three-quarters of those and land about five weighing more than 5lb.

The highlight of my four days of fishing comes on the third day, when we spot a large brown trout cruising a corner eddy beside a rapid on the Wairau. We target it with a blowfly imitation. My cast is not perfect but the fish rises as slowly as a submarine. Its great jaws breach the surface as it gulps down the fly. I set the hook by lifting the rod and it's game on as we chase it down through the rapids. We are connected via line with a breaking strain of just 7lb (any thicker and the trout could see it), so it's a nervous five-minute struggle to subdue the fish and bring it to the net. It tips the scales at 8lb, a little shy of the 10lb benchmark, but comfortably the largest brown trout I have caught. My heart is beating rapidly as we take pictures and release the fish to fight another day.

The next day, I fish with Borenstein in the Owen River, the "home" stream that runs behind the lodge. The water level is low and the fish wary. "Some of them have got PhDs," Borenstein jokes. Still, we catch the first fish we see, a nice 6lb trout, which falls to a mayfly imitation.

Trout fishing near Owen River Lodge, main; releasing a catch, top right; gardens at the lodge, above right; luxury guest cottages, left

Checklist

Owen River Lodge accommodates 12 guests in six luxury cottage suites and is open for the trout season from October 1 to the end of April. Prices range from \$NZ1190 (\$1117) to \$NZ1390 (for the peak period of December 15 to March 15) for two with guiding an extra \$NZ755 a day. The tariff includes all meals and drinks and full use of the lodge's rods, boots and wading gear. Transfers can be arranged from Nelson airport. More: owenriverlodge.co.nz.

A fish this size is pretty standard for this part of New Zealand, but it is a once-in-a-decade catch for those who fish in Australia. Having avoided the dreaded "zero", we creep upstream, eyes peeled for the next target. We chat about how Borenstein came to open a five-star fishing lodge. A former tech mogul who ran a successful recruitment business, he tells me he came to fly fishing after a friend bought him a trip as a way of suggesting he chill out. Borenstein soon went from a workaholic to a wannabe trout bum — a dream that became reality when a rival firm made an offer for his company in 2002. "I had day-dreamed about opening a fishing lodge. I was 42 and I thought if I don't do it now I never will."

He had already zeroed in on the Murchison area in the north of the South Island, a site chosen for its variety of rivers, proportion of big fish and reputation for the sunny spells that are essential for this type of fishing. "I was shell-shocked for the first two years," he admits, "but I absolutely adore it. I pinch myself many days. It is just fantastic." He caps guest numbers to a maximum of 12, hosts the sociable dinners and offers the best of everything in furnishings, food and comfort.

As we approach one of the better pools on the upper Owen, Borenstein suddenly falls silent — he's spotted a big, healthy trout. Concealing himself in the bushes he briefs me on its movements as it traverses the pool feeding freely. My first cast is astray, but the fish is none the wiser. I dare not recast the line as it will surely spot the disturbance. Luckily, its circular path continues back up the side of the pool where it spots my fly waiting suspended in the metre-deep water. The fish powers towards the imitation, inhaling it in one gulp. I set the hook and before long we have a lovely 7lb brown trout in the net.

A fish of the magical 10lb mark (much less a 14lb giant) has eluded me and I don't feel I have quite reached the summit of fly-fishing's Everest. But I have moved well past base camp and I know I'll return for another shot at the peak.

Rick Wallace was a guest of Owen River Lodge.

AUS02201TR-V1