

# travel

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## *Plus*

9 wonderful waterfalls in the North Island » **p7**

Motorbiking through Northland's back roads » **p8-p9**

Michelle Langstone spends the night on Milford Sound » **p12-13**

Travel Well: Tips and tricks for a good night's sleep » **p18**

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## *Be in to Win*

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» **p17**

# CATCHING ON

The secret South Island fishing spot Kiwis need to discover » **p10-p11**



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# ON THE FLY

Naomi Arnold visits New Zealand’s secret wish list fishing destination

Down a nondescript country lane near Murchison is one of New Zealand’s best-kept secrets: Owen River Lodge, a fly-fishing destination on the edge of Kahurangi National Park that few Kiwis know about, let alone visit. Up until Covid, more than 99 per cent of the lodge’s clientele were from overseas.

Outside New Zealand, in international fly-fishing circles, the lodge is famous, and together with Murchison’s rivers is spoken of reverently as a wishlist fishing destination. Owen River Lodge took out gongs at the New Zealand Tourism Awards in 2018 and 2019, and guests ranked it #2 in New Zealand and #5 overall in *Condé Nast Traveler’s* 2020 Readers Choice Awards, including in the Top 25 Resorts in Australia and the South Pacific — previously unheard of for a fishing lodge.

In fact, as soon as the Australian travel bubble opened, two Australians came straight over, craving their fishing fix, the lodge, and the familiar company. We meet them at dinner; one of the men is on his 16th visit.

“The return rate is astronomical,” our fishing guide Chris says, as he drives my husband and I along a dirt track one recent weekend morning, heading for the special river spot he’s picked out for us.

“We get a lot of recently retired Americans, who come over when they finally have the time and resources,” he says. “A lot of them are here for fishing but are then blown away by the scenery, the good-natured people, and how clear our water is. We take it all for granted, but their mouths are open, looking at it all.”

When Covid closed our doors, lodge owner Felix Borenstein turned to Kiwis to keep his lodge and staff going, and they responded. Normally less than 1 per cent of his business, New Zealanders came to fish, and Chris says they were equally blown away by the scenery and rivers. “They may have felt a bit guilty they haven’t got out there and explored their backyard,” he says.

He leaps out of the 4WD to open a gate — even though I’m shotgun, he won’t let me open my door for a single one.

Naturally, the first rule of fishing is that you never disclose your destination, but the river he takes us to is surrounded by beech forest, and, as anglers say, gin-clear. That makes the brown trout easy to spot. But that means they can also see us. It’s part of what makes South Island fly-fishing such an attractive challenge; one that some anglers say you’ll never master in a lifetime.

“It’s very personal and very visual,” Chris says. “Fish can definitely see you, so we try and get behind them where they have a blind spot. Stealthiness and presentation [how the fly falls in front of them] is key to South Island fishing. If you have a sloppy presentation they’ll turn their noses up.”

It’s not just that they can see you — they can also feel you. Chris thinks the fish that shot out from a riverbank as we walked a metre above it would have felt the vibrations of our footsteps and bolted.

My husband Doug and I are rank amateurs, but had learned the basics of casting the day before with Owen River Lodge casting expert Kylie Sargeant, who happens to be New Zealand’s only woman casting instructor who is certified by Fly Fishers International. We soon have a chance to put our new skills to use.

Chris guides everyone from beginners like us, to expert anglers and he’s patient as we stand in the river, kitted out in Owen River Lodge’s Simms waders, and try to create a graceful, metronomic casting pattern.

“We want to land our fly a metre or 1.3m in front; have it sink to the level we want it to and drift towards them as naturally as possible with a drag-free drift,” he says.

“It takes a wee while to master and there are so many little components to it. It’s not something that at the end of day one you’ve got the hang of. It’s not like saltwater fishing where you can master a technique quickly. It takes quite a while and that’s a lot of the appeal. You hook fish early on and it gets you addicted. But you never master it. You never get to the point where you haven’t learned something every day.”

He spots a fish undulating slightly in the current, fins out, relaxed and feeding. It’s almost a sixth sense, because most of the time, we can’t even make out what he’s seen through the river’s ripple and flow, even when he tries to point out what he’s looking at. Once, I think I’ve spotted the fish he’s describing, but it turns out I’ve spent the last few minutes watching a hank of brown weed gently moving with the current.

I tangle my line over and over, cursing and apologising until I eventually

manage to slow down, stop trying to over-egg the cast and manage to land the fly neatly in front of the fish, letting it drift down naturally enough so that — it bites! “Go! Strike!” Chris shouts, in a sudden frenzy. But instead of letting the line play out I grip on to it in panic, and the fish breaks the line and shoots off across the river. Its hook will soon rust out, but now I realise there’s another set of instructions and skills to master in order to actually land the thing.

Suffice it to say I get a couple of bites but neither of us net a thing all day. (The lodge runs a strict catch and release policy, so there’s no taking the fish home — that would mean fewer chances for the next angler.) Chris kindly pronounces himself satisfied, saying we haven’t done too badly for two beginners. After a few more casts at another fish and no takes, Chris says it’s time for lunch, to give the fish a chance to settle from our disturbance. He brings out delicious lodge-made sandwiches.

He calls himself obsessed with fly-fishing, and part of the reason he loves it is because it’s a team sport. It’s not just about the angler, but also the person spotting the fish. And if you rush, splash, and try to throw around muscle, it won’t work.

“Two people catch that fish, quite often,” he says. “The person casting might not see anything and is relying on the other person to guide them. It’s also much easier having someone net the fish for you. Just being out there enjoying other people’s company in a place is enough.”

As the afternoon goes on we are both bewitched by the hypnotic swish of the line, the satisfaction of seeing it unravel smoothly into the water, and the puzzle of tempting the fish with the fly.

We happily spend the entire day following Chris as he paces slowly up the river looking for our next target, as intent as though he’s stalking a deer. With no cellphone reception, work and family worries fall away as we slowly put one foot in front of the other and stare at the water, until we’re both subsumed into our task and its tiny goal.

By the time a chilling rain sets in around 4pm, I am decidedly cold, but say nothing because Chris, who does not seem to need feeding, watering, or warm clothes, walks carefully on.

“This could easily be 10,000 years ago,” my husband mutters as we watch his sure, primal step. Right up there could be another fish. The next fish might be the one.

Eventually, we are too chilly for comfort and Chris says he thinks the fish have gone off the bite anyway. We retreat to the 4WD and back to Owen River Lodge. Now I understand a part of the lodge’s appeal; the anticipation of returning to it from your day out fishing.

Its owner, Australian Felix Borenstein, fell in love with fishing in the region and bought the property nearly 20 years ago. The six spacious chalets are modern and well-appointed, with cosy possum-fur throws and pillows. The grounds are expertly kept with flourishing native plantings, a cutting garden of flowers — Kylie’s domain — and a spa pool. The lodge provides all the fishing gear, and Felix will even hand you a pair of polarised sunglasses if you’ve forgotten your own.

The day’s end process is well-oiled; your guide drops you off and takes care of all the wet gear, while you freshen up and then arrive at the main building for a drink and to discuss the day’s conquests and disappointments. The group dinner is at 7pm, and it’s an exceptional four-course meal with plenty of Neudorf house wine.

Going to sleep in an unfathomably cosy bed, you then get up the next day to go out fishing again, lunch, snacks, and water magically coming with you. There’s no cleaning out the car, hanging out your gear or emptying a sloshing chilly bin. No wonder the average stay is five days.

We settle in with a drink and start swapping stories. “How did you go?” we ask another couple, who had also never fly-fished before.

“Oh, it was okay,” she says. “We only netted five.” Easy to understand how the obsession begins.

For more New Zealand travel ideas and inspiration, go to [newfinder.co.nz](http://newfinder.co.nz) and [newzealand.com](http://newzealand.com)



Main: Murchison’s Owen River Lodge runs a strict catch and release policy; left: Part of Owen River Lodge’s appeal is the anticipation of returning to it from your day out fishing; above: at the lodge, all gear is provided. Photos / Supplied; Bill Bachman



## Checklist

### OWEN RIVER LODGE

**DETAILS**  
Packages are available from October to April each year, with rates for three nights accommodation and two days guided fishing starting from \$2875pp, twin share, including accommodation, all meals, wine and beer with meals, fly fishing equipment and guides. [owenriverlodge.co.nz](http://owenriverlodge.co.nz)

**ONLINE**  
[visitmurchison.nz](http://visitmurchison.nz), [nelsontasman.nz](http://nelsontasman.nz)