

CHASING BROWNS DOWN UNDER

Traveling Angler

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DISAPPOINT**

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GIANT TREVALLY: SALTWATER'S APEX PREDATOR



KIWI



Brown trout from the Owen River are cautious and persnickety, which makes landing one that much more rewarding.

“As you get acquainted, three-fish days should be your expectation, but rest assured here they employ the 80/20/80 rule: spend 80 percent of your time at 20 percent of the water that holds 80 percent of the fish.”

BROWNS

Plenty of reason to travel to New Zealand’s Owen River, the least of which is the river’s impressive brown trout.

By Jason A. Atkinson

WE JUST SAT DOWN ON a rock. I wanted to take in what just happened and not rush the moment. Eighty years of fly fishing between us, thousands of days and millions of casts perfecting our craft, and the double-digit brown trout unbuttoned. We didn’t impress him, not at all. I was happy, humble, and thankful. If it’s true you only remember the one that got away, then I confess this day on the Owen River was the best day of my life of a lifetime on the water.

DAYS BEFORE I LANDED IN Nelson and got in a right-handed rental and preceded out of cell range with the local FM blaring ‘80’s hits. It was new, yet familiar. I’m an Oregonian and the northern part of the South Island felt like an old shirt, except the people were nicer. It must have something to do with their pace of life not set to the RPMs of cable news. As I drove into the collar of the Kahurangi National Park, New Zealand’s second largest, I found the turn off to Owen River Lodge, and a few sheep paddocks later was greeted by two people who I’m certain will be lifetime friends: Felix Borenstein, owner and operator; and Kylie Sargeant, his partner and certainly better half.

“We want people to think this place is their private club,” Felix tells me. “My job is to make sure my guests are spoiled one step up from feeling at home.” I came to learn, quickly as I was shown my room, this mantra is what later gave me the experience on the river.

Several buildings compose the compound: the main house where happy hour and the should-be-famous dining room are. Manicured paths to the spa, wader room, and lounge deck overlook the river. Two more buildings of rooms reminiscent on the outside of white old western bunk houses with a Four Seasons meets New Zealand’s finest interiors. The Blind Lady of Justice in my mind had to wait getting out of my room cocoon each morning against my passion to chase giant brown trout. I’ve slept in many, many, places chasing fish, but at night I was measur-

CHRIS HEMMETER PHOTO



ing and taking pictures of Owen River Lodge's rooms with the dream of building the exact same thing on my river. Sitting on the front porch and looking over the Owen River Valley alone is worth the tariff.

Felix takes great pride in cultivating the guide culture. Six guides work exclusively at

Owen River Lodge, which is really saying something. Guides are supportive of each other, professional in every way, and want their clients to connect with fish as if they were guiding their own mother.

I was fortunate to fish three days with senior guide David Pike who greeted me with a

hardy "G'Day" and then began the shakedown to see if his new "sport journalist" lived up to billing. Years of fly fishing culture between us, I knew what he was doing, and I was a willing participant. I needed to prove myself.

But as I write this, you the reader need to understand something: you're fishing with



JASON A. ATKINSON PHOTO

friends who want to match your skill to fish. There are 29 streams holding large fish within 90 minutes outside the front gate of Owen River Lodge. Have Felix organize a helicopter flight and your number of options become without limit. You're here for the experience of fishing the South Island, but in my case,

Left, this is just one of 29 streams that hold large fish within 90 minutes outside the front gate of Owen River Lodge.

Below, the author with a respectable brown trout that took some coaxing and deft casting.



DAVE PIKE PHOTO

Dave needed to see if someone who chases “those steelheads in Ore-gun” could play.

Guides have several jobs. They are your local expert, your psychiatrist, your coach, your host, your fish-finder, your cheerleader, your food provider, your attitude adjuster, your expert fly chooser, a meteorologist, an entomologist, a historian, a river protector, nature respecter, sunscreen applicator and your ride back. Most importantly of all — your eyes.

This is the best sight fishing for brown trout in the world. The water so gin-clear a spotted fish seems suspended in the air, an honest-to-goodness optical illusion. Here in Middle Earth, you walk upstream to chase fish. Because of no hatchery stock, fish grow large and often one or two fish are dominant in the run commanding other fish to find their own homes. It's not big number fishing, its big fish hunting where four to six brown trout landed is a solid day for a good angler. As you get acquainted, three-fish days should be your expectation, but rest assured here they employ the 80/20/80 rule: spend 80 percent of your time at 20 percent of the water that holds 80 percent of the fish.

As soon as your feet get wet you will be washed over with the realization this might be the most beautiful place you've ever casted a fly. Traveling anglers are fortunate knowing fish live in beautiful places, but

the Owen River Valley in full color change of fall is spectacular. Yellows, bright reds, deep greens of the grass all available for your eyes to look up and take a break from the intensity of precision casting.

A finish carpenter and proud father in Australia in off-season, Dave Pike and I became fast friends. About the same age we were told during one extended happy hour we had the same smirk and same ability not to confess every fish that was caught. “These fish are cunning,” is a phrase he used hourly, now embedded in my personal lexicon. Here you walk behind your guide and learn to completely trust where your blind cast is targeted. With the water so clear, and us behind the fish, we needed long leaders so when the fly lands upstream and begins to be presented, our fly line would not land in the fish's peripheral vision. In fact, nothing can be in their peripheral vision: leave bright colored shirts and hats at home.

As Dave started to trust my casting abilities and I his vision, things started to really come together. We had one fast action 6-weight rod, two lunches, four eyeballs and Dave's pockets full of fly boxes. Fish started to be touched, pictures taken, and knowledge gleaned about these rivers as a 'knowledge transfer' learns a foreign language from a three weeks course condensed on a CD.

Fishing here is about respect, not about

It's a spot-and-stalk game in New Zealand.



JASON A. ATKINSON PHOTO

your ego. Brown trout in these waters are special. You can't impress them nor force them to eat. Their color, spotting, and crisply developed jaws are living works of Almighty's art and this fishery commands every skill you've learned down deep in your soul. You hunt them, not fish for them. You let them go and realize you're place in the world.

In the fly-fishing world, your place is probably like mine, just one degree off from knowing everyone else. Sharing the week was many-season-Australian-returnee Michael Blake and four Americans who were all one degree away from friends of mine back home: Paul Moseley owner of Ruby Springs Lodge in Montana; Barry Pike of Pasadena; Meade Boutwell, an Oregonian turned Californian; and Chris Hemmeter from the San Francisco area. It says a lot about a place when the owner of one of Montana's best lodges goes to Owen River Lodge to fish. This group colored my experience with laughter, toasts, a few bummed cigars and mostly true tales.

When Barry got a word, his teenage daughter wrecked the family car back home, a world away, and the reality set in there was nothing he could do about it, his friends helped him make Oban influenced proverbial lemonade, toss his hands in the air and make a cast. (She was fine by the way; but not the family truckster.) Life happens, go fish anyway.

"I want to give people world-class experiences," I heard Paul say speaking to his tribe, which was enough for Felix to call the heli and the next day all four flew to water not touched in weeks, catching, and more importantly landing fish, none will soon forget.

Each night, every dinner course was presented and explained, and the general room volume increased the more Australian and New Zealand's finest wines were poured. Dinners are a sophisticated fusion between Maori, European and Polynesian using the finest local ingredients: garden, land and sea. Head chef Ryan likes to mix traditional New Zealand dishes with his personal twists and

surprises from his years perfecting his multicultural gastronomic style overseas with what he calls "Pacifica." I think the most delicate palates will not only be marveled, but more importantly will remember Ryan's work.

Felix is a humble person but does have a proud smile. And he should be because what he has built at the lodge enjoys some of the highest return rates in the business: 50 percent from north America; 30 percent from Australia; 10 percent European anglers and the rest from the remaining corners of the globe call the Owen River Lodge their private club. Those of us who have invested our lives will tell you fly fishing is about more than fish—it's about the people and the adventure. I think Felix's success is due to Felix. People return to see him, have an adventure, enjoy happy hour and eat at the lodge and then chase world-class fish.

We fished the Maruia River, the Motueka River, which Dave grew up on, but the day that out marks the rest was spent on

Paul Moseley with a mature brown.

the home beat right in front of the lodge. Anticipation was served at breakfast, at least that and some low grumbles about Oban and smashed cars from my fellow traveling anglers. Felix and Kylie serve breakfast with the most important food group of morning, coffee, and got us out the door with our lunches to catch the bus, I mean guide. But Dave and I didn't go far that day, just to the top of the paddock where one of Felix's humorous no trespassing signs is posted.

The evening weather was still wringing its way out and tossing some moisture our way. A little breezy too, but we were in sync glassing for fish. Dave got down low, nearly crawling on the rock bank, to take a look into a pool. I held back, fishing a double nymph rig with 22 feet of leader. With that much dental



floss hanging out there, you have to have a rod that will generate enough line speed to cast a tight loop into the wind and hit the target that might only be 6 inches by 6 inches.

It was technical, tight, hard, blind casting and I was all smiles. Dave called the strike before I saw it and by then I had learned to set on his command. Landing this monster in the clear

The advertisement features a large background image of a fly fisher on a rocky bank next to a clear, green river. A black box in the upper center contains the Owen River Lodge logo, which depicts a mountain range above the text "OWEN RIVER LODGE" and "SOUTH ISLAND, NEW ZEALAND". Below the main image, a white banner reads "New Zealand's finest 5-star rated fly fishing lodge" and "Stylish accommodations, stunning food, superb service and outstanding fishing". At the bottom left, two small inset photos show the lodge's interior dining area and an exterior view of the building at night. The bottom right corner contains the lodge's contact information: "Owen Valley East Road, Murchison South Island, New Zealand", "T: +64 3 523 9075 E: info@owenriverlodge.co.nz", and "www.OwenRiverLodge.co.nz".



A fine specimen from one of the many streams fished by Owen River Lodge guests.

CHRIS HEIMETER PHOTO

water was hard fought. The fish took me to backing once and was certainly a team effort to land and release. But he only the first.

The Owen is a wiggly river, winding its way into the tundra. We walked in and out, forensically looking for fish. In one run, the clouds opened enough for the sun to pass in long enough to ensure a shadow was in fact a living fish. For what must have been 30 minutes I made the exact long cast, upstream, above him putting nymphs on his nose. Undeterred and experienced, Dave went through 19 fly changes, but we were only encouraging refusals. I'd never seen anything like it. Big fish in skinny water rejecting everything being fed to him.

Keeping a firm eye on him as we walked up to the next pool, Dave spotted another and I got into position. "This is the one. I think it's a double (digit)."

Then Dave started on his set up mumble to himself. "Let me see that. Not that fly. Cunning, these fish are cunning. Where's the sun?"



JASON A. ATKINSON PHOTO

OK follow me. Jason follow me." I guess that last one was directed at me.

I stood in water not deep enough to lap over my boot laces, the sun high and too my right illuminating all the water save a green pool under two trees. These were going to be

long casts and prayers were being squeezed off to be the best I've ever made. Dave walked higher in the riffle to get a better look and provide color commentary.

"He's gonna ... he's an eater ..."

Still not sure if those were to me or himself. I tried everything I've ever learned about double haul and slowing it down for a soft presentation. For a brief moment, a lifetime of this passion came together.

"UHHGH!" Dave's word for set.

I set. He was on. Heart pounding like kissing a girl for the first time. The fish immediately turned downriver, ran into the sun and bolted like being shot from a 12 gauge. I gave him all the slack I had, quickly getting him on the reel and kept tension holding the rod high in the air. But the fish was unimpressed and broke off as if my fly was just a bug on his windshield.

That's when we sat down on the Owen River and called it the greatest day I've had in a lifetime of fishing.



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW WHEN YOU GO

LOCATION Owen River Lodge is located in New Zealand in the northern region of the South Island.

SPECIES Brown Trout

RIVERS Acheron, Alma, Aorere, Baton, Branch, Buller, Clarence, Cobb, Deepdale, D'Urville, Gowan, Goulter, Leatham, Mangles, Nunya, Matakītaki, Matiri, Maruia, Motueka, Motupiko, Owen, Pelorus, Rainbow, Riwaka, Rolling, Rai, Sabine, Spring Creek, Severn, Saxton, Tutaki, The Branch, Travers, Takaka, Wangapeka, Waimea, Woolley, Wairau, Waingaro and Waihopai rivers.

SEASON

- *Early:* October/November
- *High Season:* December, January, February and March
- *Late:* April

FLIGHTS Expect to fly to Auckland on your international airline and catch an internal Air New Zealand 90-minute flight to Nelson. Flex ticket is highly encouraged.

PASSPORTS/VISAS You will need a valid passport.

CUSTOMS Travelers will go through customs in Auckland, New Zealand.

TRAVEL TIP New Zealand Customs officers are very serious about maintaining New Zealand's disease-free status. It's imperative that you declare any fishing equipment you have. Make sure your boots and waders are absolutely dry and spotless with no mud, grass or any other material attached to them. We recommend that you do not bring any fly tying materials (e.g. feathers).

TIME ZONE New Zealand Standard Time (NZST), 12 hours in advance of Coordinated Universal Time (UTC). During summer months—from the last Sunday in September until the first Sunday in April—daylight saving time is observed and clocks are advanced one hour. New Zealand Daylight Time (NZDT) is 13 hours ahead of UTC.

WEATHER Mild autumn weather temps with the occasional rain shower.

LANGUAGE All guides speak a flavor of English.

CURRENCY/TRAVEL CASH Exchange USD into New Zealand Dollars. It is recommended that you travel with approximately \$1,000-\$1,250 (per week of travel) for gratuities, alcohol, and miscellaneous gifts. It is wise to have at least \$50 U.S. changed for small in town tipping and/or on the road snacks/drinks.

CREDIT CARDS VISA and most other major cards are accepted widely from the airport to small gas stations in the bush.

POWER COMMUNICATIONS Owen River Lodge has all electrical outlets for US devices power needs. Bring a power converter for stays in smaller hotels.



David Pike laying out a cast.

JASON A. ATKINSON PHOTO

FISHING LICENSES Fishing licenses are not included and but are issued on-site.

MEDICAL FACILITIES The nearest medical facilities are 90 minutes away in Nelson.

WATER The water is clear, clean, drinkable and you might want to try to bottle it and bring it back with you.

CLOTHING/PACKING SUGGESTIONS The autumn climate of this area is mild yet can be wet. Bring sun tan lotion and your raincoat. Anglers are advised to wear layers of clothing, allowing you to add or subtract garments during the day. All guests should be prepared with thermal underwear, fleece/soft shell jacket, and a reliable rain jacket. Bring no bright colored shirts or hats. Most people wet-wade with dark long johns, shorts and wet wading socks. Owen River Lodge has all boots, wet socks, Simms waders and Sage rods if you want to travel light.

ADVICE Bring a waterproof backpack and a light raincoat. Your sunglasses are the most important tool you'll need. Lastly, do yourself and your guide a favor: practice casting with long leaders before you go. You'll be happier and more successful.

SINGLE HAND RODS 9-11ft / 6-7wt.

SINGLE HAND LINES Floating lines balanced to your rod are what is needed.

REELS A reliable drag on your reel is preferred.

LEADERS You're going to cast the longest leaders you've ever tried to throw; 12- to 22 feet are the range.

TIPPET Fluorocarbon is the tippet materials of choice. Have it in 6 to 10 pounds.

FLIES It's hard to give advice on flies for the simple reason your guide will switch around sometimes between as few as two casts to

satisfy a wary trout. I suggest saving money on flies and increasing your tip to your guide. I experienced 22 fly changes for one fish!

ACCOMMODATIONS AND MEALS Owen River Lodge designed their six, purpose-built guest cottage suites with both the angler and non-angler in mind. They are located in the garden, a short stroll from the main lodge building. These luxuriously-appointed suites enjoy stunning views of the water, the valley and Kahurangi National Park, with the delightful sound of the Owen River in the background.

Their design emphasizes light and space, accentuated by soaring, cathedral-type ceilings. They all feature fine art works and 100 year-old recycled Oregon beams and woodwork. Their accommodation suites can be configured with either a king-size double bed or twin single beds. Total capacity is 12 guests.

The food at Owen River Lodge could best be described as stunning. They use the freshest of local produce, including items from the lodge garden, tended according to organic principles, supplies the kitchen with produce every day and is backed up by daily deliveries of fresh fruit and vegetables grown in the Nelson region.

When it comes to seafood, nearby Nelson has a thriving fishing industry, so what they catch on Monday is served at the lodge on Tuesdays.

BOOKING OPTIONS For availability and insight into both operations, contact Kyle at Fly Water Travel. Kyle@flywatertravel.com or 800-552-2729.

OWEN RIVER LODGE <https://www.owenriverlodge.co.nz> or phone +64 3 523-9075.