

Floating Patagonia

Our first fishing day at Patagonian Basecamp

we floated the Rio Claro Solar, also known as the Rio Quinto, a modest-sized stream large enough to float, but far from big water. It's beautiful, crystal clear water, filled with downed trees that harbor big trout. Greg Bricker was our guide, and we hit it off well – an excellent instructor who taught me a great trick to improve my streamer fishing hookups (keep stripping until you come tight to the fish, and never lift the rod to strike – same as bonefishing). We floated in a self-bailing cataraft with comfortable seats fore-and-aft for anglers, and the guide rowing from the middle. It was rapid-fire fishing, slamming dries and streamers to the bank, covering as much

water as possible – the water was a little high, so we were moving fast. Greg was clear that the stream didn't have many fish per river mile, but the shots we got would all be for large trout...he was correct on both counts. I blew plenty of shots as I attempted to master the new streamer technique, but at days end had a respectable number of hookups with browns and rainbows in the 16-20+-inch range, and even managed to land some of them. One of my more spectacular failures remains emblazoned in my mind, an absolute TOAD of a brown trout that chased and ate my streamer two times...and I "lifted" to strike, both times. Needless to say, I did not get a third chance. Greg said nothing, which said it all!



Another day we fished with Greg on Lago Claro Solar which feeds the stream of the same name. I had fished this lake the last time I was down (from a funky little rowboat – this time we had a beautiful driftboat), and had caught numerous large trout, though not numbers of fish. It was the same this time – I probably had a dozen shots during the day, and turned half of those into landed fish, all of which were studs (as were the ones I farmed, and I was sight-fishing quite a bit of the time). The day ended on a memorable note with my hooking an enormous fish at the mouth of one of the tiny creeks that feed the lake. It was windy and rainy at the time, so all we got to see was a huge fish chase my streamer, eating it several times (I never lifted) before finally coming tight 15 feet off the boat. There was a glimpse of a huge copper/orange flank as it rolled (all our eyes were as big as saucers, as this fish was a giant), then I was immediately far into my backing. I knew it had to be a king salmon because of its size, but Greg assured they had never seen a king in this lake...and it was colored just like a brown trout! Therein ensued twenty minutes of a halibut-like battle, with the fish pretzeling my six-weight relentlessly, well into my backing, straight down. Finally I got it to the surface, saw the salmon tail, and told the guys it was not a brown, but a thirty-pound king. Surprisingly, none of us were all that disappointed, as it had been a bit of an epic experience, regardless of the fish species! It was undoubtedly one of the oddest-colored kings I've ever seen, seemingly taking on the coloration of the browns that call the lake home.

We next took two days out to experience the Temple Camp, a beautifully built and perfectly located out-camp on the banks of the Rio Figueroa. About a two-hour drive from the lodge, we left early one morning, and opted to float the Rio Pico our first day with long-time PBC guide Nick Lawton. This is the smallest stream the lodge floats (here they use traditional rafts), and staying at the Temple Camp allows guests to access and fish it, and be back to camp within thirty minutes...perfect, as opposed to the too-long-of-commute it would be to try to fish it from the main lodge. I fell in love with this stream, a fast-falling freestone starting high in the arid high-desert plateaus of the Argentine border, and tumbling quickly into the deep canyons of the Rio Figueroa watershed. Fish were a mix of browns and rainbows, and were very aggressive to large foam dries, or hopper/dropper rigs, and averaged 14-18 inches (though during our week one guest landed a 25-inch brown here, so one must stay attentive!). PBC is the only lodge that floats this stretch of the stream, and the fish are numerous and aggressive almost to a fault – we lost track of the numbers of fish which attacked our dries and droppers. It was a gorgeous float with an awesome guide on what can only be described as a perfect trout stream, and I cannot wait to see it again. That night we sat on the wooden deck outside of the Camp's dining room and enjoyed fresh lamb ribs and fine wine, watching the Rio Figueroa slide by. The camp has flush toilets and hot water showers (which almost disqualify it as a camp in my book!), welcome attributes in a wilderness setting. It was a cold night, and we slept like the dead in our wood-floored dome tents, snuggled in our real beds (no cots here) and plush down comforters. Awakening to hot coffee and hot breakfast the following morning, we watched our guide Craig Boyd – the lodge's most experienced whitewater oarsman – prepare a large, hard-bottomed cataraft for our day on the Rio Figueroa. Collecting our gear and



lunches, a short drive upriver found us launching into the bottom section of the Rio Pico, which dumped quickly into "the Fig". Fishing the very first bank of the main river with a streamer, we quickly hooked, lost and landed several nice fish, both browns and rainbows. Thus began a day-long experience filled with aggressive fish, lots of fish, large fish, big rapids, incredible scenery, and wonderful camaraderie. The float is on a stretch of the river which has a very quick elevation drop, and much of the fishing on the top half of the drift is firing repetitive casts to seductive slow pockets on the bank, while the guide tries heroically to slow the boat somewhat in the torrential flows. Add to this the jaw-dropping scenery, and you have the recipe for a fishing disaster: If I tuned out the amazing canyon walls and rugged mountains blurring by, I was able to hook crazy numbers of fish...yet too often I found myself trying to do both – fish and watch the scenery – and doing neither well. As we pulled off onto a flat gravel bar to eat lunch, a beautiful clear tributary bubbling in at our feet, Craig explained that we would shortly reach the first of two Class 5 rapids we'd experience that day. He gave a thorough and calming talk about what we should expect, and got us fitted up with white water helmets and life vests. It was a blast! Craig is a real whitewater pro with years of experience and gnarly rapids in his past, making El Diablo Rapids, and then on its heels Pinball Rapids an adventure not soon forgotten. Having been spit out of Pinball, we pulled to the side, removed all our whitewater gear, and prepared for the second half of our fishing day. It was as if we had been transported to a different river after the rapids; where there had been non-stop heavy flows and rattle drops, now there were long, sliding pools flowing on both banks by sheer rock walls. It was eerily quiet, floating through these cathedral-like canyons, the river finally hushed after a riotous morning. And here there were more actively rising fish. Craig had to point them out at first, long blue shadows suspended inches beneath the river's placid surface, nosing up methodically to softly gulp food items we could not see. He showed us how the fish were all congregated in the "scum lines", narrow corridors of surface flows where all the drifting flotsam collected. Excited, eager to put a fly on these trout, I was surprised to see Craig knot an enormous foam dry pattern to my tippet...weren't these fish eating small bugs off the surface? He smiled and assured me they were, but that there was no reason to match the hatch – these trout are rarely fished over, and would eat a giant dry as eagerly as a tiny one. He was right! Watching these big rainbows leisurely and confidently tip up through the clear flows to engulf our dries proved too great of a distraction even for Val (Val Atkinson, the photographer who accompanied me on this adventure), and for one of the only times in the trip he exchanged camera for fly rod, and went to work.

About an hour and a dozen big rainbows later the water changed yet again, regaining a little speed, with mild rapids interspersing shallow pools filled



*Finally I got it to the surface,
saw the salmon tail, and told the guys
it was not a brown,
but a thirty-pound king*

with rocky ledges. Slightly disoriented at this change of water type, I looked back at Craig for direction, and he answered with two words – brown trout. I went back to a streamer, and Val switched to an even larger dry, and we finished out our float with several big brown trout "eats", and a couple of impressive fish to the net. Floating to the gravel beach directly behind the Temple Camp, we disembarked and, leaving Craig to the boat, trudged up the hill to waiting appetizers and cold beers. Not a bad gig...

We had a couple days of steady rain then, leaving the main rivers running high. On the first of those days we floated the upper Rio Roselot with Craig, and had a blast with dries and droppers for half a day (and another Class 5 rapid), before too many incoming muddy tributaries colored the river, and finished our day. Back at the lodge that night, lodge owner Marcel Sijnesael pulled me aside and with a twinkle in his eye let me know we'd be going to a very special place the next day – the Jungle Laguna. It was a place they can only fish in high water, he explained, and so it only saw a few anglers each year. Tomorrow I would be one of those few. Just arriving to the laguna is a story in itself, and reminded me yet again what an amazingly intrepid individual Marcel is, just to go out and discover the fisheries he has in far less than favorable "discovering" conditions. After an adventurous arrival procedure, Marcel guided our jet sled into a beautiful little hidden gem of a laguna, where we spent the next few hours hooking excellent numbers of beautifully-marked, heavy-shouldered browns and rainbows. After lunch,

Marcel, eager to show us even more of the myriad places he can fish successfully during periods of high water, motored us around to another great laguna, and a couple of small clear streams that remain unaffected by heavy rain. All beautiful water, and all with fish ready to eat flies!

On our last day Marcel wanted to jet-boat Val and I - and his own photographer Marcus - up the Rio Palena to see his newly-completed Palena River Camp. Marcel took the two photographers in his boat, and I went with guide Hayden Stribley. The idea was for Hayden and me to fish our way up, while the photographers went ahead and shot the camp. Just after Marcel's boat left us heading upriver, the tiller handle came off Hayden's motor, which of course changed the nature of our day! To his credit, Hayden did a remarkable job of reattaching the handle with JB Weld and a Leatherman, and we fished our way back downriver, interspersing short stretches of motorized travel with long floats, Hayden at the oars guiding the boat down first one bank, then the other. Clearly he knew this stretch of river well, as wherever he told me to expect a fish, it was there...and while there were not a lot of fish per river mile here, they were all big. The last third of the day was amazing, with Hayden on the oars, exhorting me to cast my Home Invader streamer further and further back up underneath overhanging trees, water



that was lousy with downed timber just beneath the surface of the water. So I'd slam it as far in as humanly possible, then have to strip as hard and fast as possible to keep the lead-eyed fly from hanging up on the drowned wood... a few hours of this was a lot of work! It paid off, though, as not being afraid to lose a few flies bought us some heavyweight browns, bulky fish that would suddenly just appear off the banks and chase down the fly. I landed three memorable fish, and managed to lose twice that many in ways that caused even Hayden – a guide of herculean resiliency and good humor – to roll his eyes in despair. A great day...

On that, our last night, we enjoyed a classic Chilean lamb asado, and because it was Val's birthday Marcel's wife Caro had cooked an amazing chocolate cake, and we all toasted him. The cake was so good that Val – who had totally sworn off desserts for this trip – broke down and had two pieces, and even brought a big chunk of it home in his luggage!

We were up early the next morning, and following an enormous breakfast Marcel loaded three of us and our luggage into his Excursion and drove us the two hours back to the town of Chaiten. He stilled us around the village, and it was fascinating to see how much of it is toured five feet deep in ash following the volcanic eruption of a few years ago. It is reviving, though, with the government pouring money into its recovery, and encouraging people to move back. The airport this year was simply a straight stretch of the main gravel road – they'd block off traffic temporarily when they knew a plane was coming – with two shipping containers stacked on top of each other serving as the "tower". The charter pilot was great; instead of just heading down the coast immediately to Puerto Montt, he first climbed steeply into the coastal mountains behind town and did a 360-degree circle of the Chaiten volcano, allowing us a birds-eye view right down into the smoking cauldron...simply breathtaking! Arriving to the charter airport in Puerto Montt, we were greeted by Marcel's driver – a really likable, helpful guy – who brought us to the Puerto Montt airport and made sure we got checked in correctly and quickly, and without having to pay any luggage overweight charges – sweet!

Val and I flew back to Santiago together, then on to Dallas, where we parted ways, he flying to San Francisco and myself to Sacramento. During the whole travel portion of the trip – on both American and Lan – transfers went smoothly. The only near miss was on the flight from Sacramento to Dallas at the front end of the trip, which was delayed an hour; fortunately there was a One World airport employee waiting for me as I came off the plane, who guided me quickly to my Santiago flight, which was about ready to depart.

All in all, a most extraordinary Chilean adventure!

Mike Mercer



4140 Churn Creek Road • Redding, California 96002

530-222-3555 • 800-669-3474 • fax: 530-222-3572

e-mail: travel@theflyshop.com www.theflyshop.com