

Patagonia 2017

Friday, January 06, 2017

The flight from Houston to Buenos Aires lasted a bit over 9 hours. I was fortunate enough to have some empty seats next to me, so I ended up with my own row which was a real bonus. After a couple of restless hours of sleep and a couple of movies, I was touching down in Argentina.

Clearing immigrations was quick and easy, but when waiting for my baggage I noticed another, similar bag come down the conveyer belt. It was not my bag, and soon it was the only bag left. I went to the baggage counter, and they checked and quickly confirmed that my bag had been checked in as arrived in BA...but since it was nowhere to be found it was an obvious assumption that someone had grabbed the wrong bag. The United people were great. They walked me over to the customs line to try and fine the person who'd grabbed my bag, but they were already gone. While I filled out some paperwork they somehow tracked the person down.

I walked through Customs, where Gaia Macchiavello from LOL Argentina was waiting for me. We walked over to the United Airlines office to wait for about 20 minutes before my bag showed up. Whew. Gaia called her driver over, and in minutes we were heading into the city.

It was about a 30 minute drive from the International airport to the Hotel Intersur Recoleta. Marty, Doug, and John had arrived a couple of hours earlier, but their rooms were not ready so they had walked around the corner to a café to grab a snack and a beer while they waited. Fortunately, my room was ready, so I checked in and headed up for a quick shower.

I went for a short walk before meeting up with everyone again for our afternoon tour of the city. Around the corner and only about three blocks away, I came across the famous cemetery at Recoleta. This hotel is situated in a nice, safe neighborhood, and convenient to be so close to such a great spot. There are several cafes and restaurants within easy walking distance. The hotel itself is nice and clean, with a great, English speaking staff. My room is a small two room suite, with a king bed in one room and a small sitting room and desk in the other.

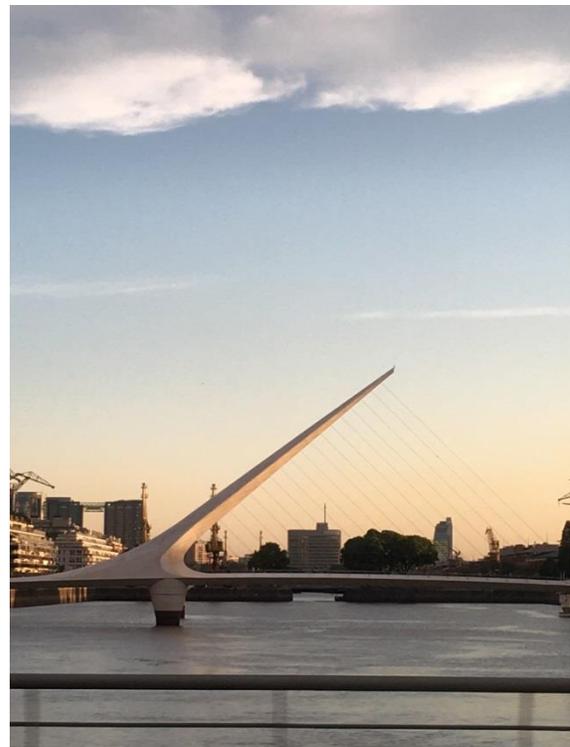
When I returned to the hotel, Marty was waiting in the lobby. We caught up on our travels, then Gaia arrived. A half hour later, Doug and John still hadn't emerged, so Marty went up to knock on their door to learn they'd inadvertently fallen asleep, tired from the long travel down. They emerged downstairs a few minutes later, and we climbed into the van with Gaia for the afternoon of touring the city.

Gaia is amazing. I cannot believe the amount of information she shared with us, and the amount of the city we were able to see in a few short hours. It was mostly a driving tour with Gaia talking the entire time telling us all about the history of the city, the country, the politics, and the specifics of each different region within the city. From Recoleta we drove to the huge city park where summer-bound Portenos (what Argentines call people who live in Buenos Aires)

were out in force walking, paddle-boating in the man-made lake, and lounging about on the grass enjoying the sun. We took a short stroll through the rose garden. Then drove through the Palermo district, circled back to Recoleta to try to go through the famous cemetery where Evita Perone is buried, but due to a health accident from a tourist they had just closed the cemetery so we couldn't go in.

While we stood just in front of the cemetery gates peering inside at the long rows of above ground tombs, a pair of nicely dressed women approached and started talking to John. They asked him where he was from, and one of them asked if she could "spend some time" with him later. John politely informed her that he was happily married, to which she replied, "I am very discreet." She left a business card with him, just the name "GEM" and a phone number. This made for good laughs the rest of the afternoon, as well as for the rest of the trip!

From Recoleta we drove down the massive avenue de 9 July, past the Plaza de Mayo and the Casa Rosada, then down to San Telmo and walked around the market area for a bit, then stopped at Café Tortoni for a coffee. Next we drove down through La Boca, though it was getting too late in the evening to safely walk the streets of this sketchy, but colorful barrio, the birthplace of the Tango. We continued on past the Boca Junior soccer stadium, then past Puerto Moreno with a quick look at the Calatrava bridge, a smaller version of the famous Sundial Bridge that makes our hometown of Redding famous.



By now afternoon was turning into evening, and we returned to the Recoleta area where we said goodbye to our driver and walked into a restaurant called Fervor, just a few blocks away from the hotel. We arrived at 8:00 and figured we'd be the first ones there, but a few groups of other early-eating Americans had already sat down. We walked up to the third floor, which was a garden area semi-outside and quite comfortable, and sat down to enjoy a wonderful Argentine dinner of steaks, grilled vegetables, and French fries, complimented by a delicious Argentine Malbec. Great food, good company, and a couple of hours of entertaining conversation, made that much more entertaining by Gaia's constant dialogue. I bought dinner for the group, which they very much appreciated.

We walked back to the hotel with Gaia, then said goodnight with plans to meet up late morning to head to the domestic airport for the flight to Esquel. Everyone said goodnight, and headed up to their rooms for a few hours of much-needed shuteye.

Saturday, January 07, 2017

I woke at 7:00 am to the midsummer sun streaming through the blinds in my hotel room at the Hotel Intersur Recoleta in Buenos Aires. Later that morning Gaia Macchiavello from LOL Argentina met us – me, Marty, John, and Doug – in the hotel lobby, and soon she was helping to walk us through the check-in for Aerolinas Argentina for the domestic flight from BA to Esquel. They do not allow any fishing gear in your carry-on bag, so they made everyone check any luggage that had fishing gear in it. I had all my rods, reels, flies, etc in my one big bag, and they would have preferred that it had been in two smaller bags, one for my clothes, etc, and one for my fishing gear. Because all my gear was in one large bag, I ended up having to pay an additional \$400 pesos (about US\$25).

We found our gate and settled in to wait, noticing that fully half of the people waiting were obviously going fishing. The flight lasted about 3 hours before the plane pulled to a stop in front of a small terminal. I walked down the stairwell into the crisp, breezy Patagonian afternoon. We entered the terminal, which was packed, everyone pushing to be as close as possible to the small conveyer. Eventually the bags started coming and organized chaos ensued, every bag finding its way to an owner. Several of the Las Pampas guides made their way into the terminal to help gather our bags. In the mostly gravel parking lot at the far end of the terminal was a series of parked Toyota Hilux trucks, several with raft frames strapped to the beds.

We loaded up our bags and piled into the car the trucks for the 3 hour drive to Las Pampas Lodge. The drive was interesting, somewhat akin to driving across southern Wyoming, only the sagebrush was replaced by clumps of foot-high brown grass. Miles of grass-clumped plains extended towards treeless hills with rocky outcrops. Every once in a while I would lose my breathe when I caught a glimpse of the snowcapped Andes poking through a gap in the hills.

Most of the road was paved, but every once in a while we would hit a stretch of rough gravel. There were a surprising number of cars on the road going in both directions, especially given the seemingly desolate and mostly remote nature of the region. We passed through one town, Tecka, which featured a couple of hundred adobe-concrete “cabins” and a gas station, and that’s about it. Marty also spotted a couple small “flocks” of wild Rhea along the side of the road, the small ostrich-like birds whose feathers make steelhead fly tyers drool.

A couple of hours into the drive suddenly the terrain began to change. Instead of the flatlands we’d been driving through, there was gradient and some green with short scraggly trees called *nire* looking like scrub oak popping up all over the place. We pulled up to the gates of the town of Rio Pico, where a policeman was stopping traffic in the middle of the road to check driver’s licenses. We rolled through town, a quaint village with clean houses, and several gauchos riding



horses down the cobbled streets. Kids and families were everywhere, as they should be on a Saturday afternoon in a small town.

At the far edge of town the pavement ended, and a gravel road began to turn up into the mountains. We climbed up a steep ridge before dropping down into a broad, scenic valley. After crossing through the small valley we drove for another twenty minutes winding through a forested ravine alongside a meandering creek before turning right into the entrance for the Las Pampas lodge.

We were shown to our rooms, and told that the bar was open inside the main lodge and to help ourselves to whatever we'd like while we get settled in. Open bar, on the house.



The lodge is quite beautiful, all made of logs in a mountain log cabin feel, but also with some style with big beautiful photos of the region and a lot of classic iron decorations, some with a fish theme and others a more regional gaucho theme. The main “lodge” has the small bar area with a mini fridge stuffed with beers, water, and soda, and a collection of liquors and glasses, next to a huge wine

rack with mostly Malbecs, of course. Adjacent to the little bar is a long rectangular table, behind which is a series of stairs leading to an upstairs balcony that serves as a second small social area; there is also an extra bedroom here where a couple of the guides stay.

Across from the table is the best feature of all, a circular alcove with a blazing outdoor-style fireplace in the center and a series of stadium-style seating all around it. It is a wonderful social centerpiece. Off this alcove there are doors on either side leading to the two wings of guest rooms for the main lodge. Our two rooms were to the left, another two rooms where to the right. There is also an extra casita located in front of the lodge for an additional 2 guests, perfect for couples.

The rooms are spacious and well appointed, with two twin beds, a small closet area, and an en suite bath. There is a small table with a bottle of water and two glasses, and a sitting chair. Hooks for waders are just outside. The doorway opens up to a panoramic view of the Andes out the window and front porch, simply spectacular!

We unpacked a few things and started organizing, then headed in to grab a cocktail, meet the rest of the group, and spend the evening getting to know each other. The host, an Argentine nicknamed Tutte, is exceptional, very personable and extremely knowledgeable about many things, while ever present to fill wine glasses and make sure everyone has everything they might possibly want or need.

Around 9:00 dinner was served, starting with a delicious French onion soup, followed with a barbecue pork dish with grilled potatoes, and finished with a delicious dessert of strawberry crumble. The other anglers at the lodge had all traveled straight through from home that day so they were tired, and we were still recovering from the travel ourselves so we all returned to our rooms to settle in for a good night's rest.

Sunday, January 08, 2017

We had set our alarms for 7:00 am, but the sun coming up over the Andes woke us up a bit before that. Soon we were enjoying hot coffee and a breakfast of eggs made to order. Since we were ahead of schedule, we had a bit of down time as the guides don't get ready to go out until about 9:00. It was an easy place to kill a bit of time, looking out at the beautiful view of the mountain range opposite us.

At 9:00 the guides showed up and helped us load our gear into the trucks. John and I were paired up with Andreas, along with a young American named Eric who was the assistant. Marty and Doug were going with guide Nico, and assistant Kirk (another American). Although the wind was blowing, it was not gale force winds so they thought it would be good to try "Lago Cinco". The plan was to start at Lake 5 in the morning, and depending on how the morning went either stay there or go over to do a short float on the Rio Pico in the afternoon.

The drive out to Lago Cinco took about 45 minutes, through a maze of gravel roads that wound through the truck-high scraggly *nire* trees, past at least 8 different gates. We zoomed past a couple of gauchos on horseback trailed by their dogs, and saw a couple of European hares bounding off through the brush. We went right past the border patrol guard station to Chile,

where we would be crossing in a few days.



Andreas showed us where there was a road to a public access on the lake, explaining that we were going to a private access at the far end of the lake. Someone had started a small resort there years ago, but it was defunct now and a great spot to launch the rafts because it was in the lee of the mountain so relatively calm at that end.

We pulled up to the boarded-up cabins and stopped right at the side of the lake, unloading the trucks, pulling on waders and rigging rods while the guides inflated the rafts. We were all fishing 6 weight rods with floating lines, and tied on big terrestrial dry fly patterns. I started with a black Fat Albert.

Andreas had a small 4-horse outboard motor to put on the back of his raft, so we started off floating with the wind along the left shoreline. The other boat stayed there in the calmer waters to fish the areas that were protected and near the trucks, a spot known for big fish that cruised the reed-beds in that part of the lake.

As soon as we pulled away down the shoreline the wind started to pick up, and the first of many whitecaps of the day were starting up in the middle of the lake. We timed our casts to avoid tangles, popping cast after cast against the shoreline as we drifted past. Although we were on a lake, with the flow of the water from the constant wind it felt like fishing in moving water, and we'd never go more than a few seconds without recasting. The water was crystal clear, and if it weren't for the chop on the water you could probably count pebbles at 20 feet deep.

We hadn't been at it for five minutes when a huge nose popped up behind my fly. I set the hook, but way too soon and pulled the fly out of its mouth. A couple hundred yards down the shoreline I saw another big fish charge up from the depths, only to turn away inches from the fly and disappear once again. A third big fish magically appeared below my fly shortly thereafter, and this time I waited for him to slowly, slowly slurp the fly into his big gaping jaw before setting the hook. I was tight to him, and he started swimming downriver but three seconds later the fly came loose. These were all huge trout, well over 22 inches, amazing to see them looming up in the clear water.

It seemed like we were getting a rise about every 100-200 yards, and sure enough the next fish came to John's fly. He set the hook perfectly, and from my seat in the back of the raft I could see a very long fish, at least 24 inches, and an almost golden brown in color. John landed it a few minutes later after a well-fought battle.



The next fish, again about 100-200 yards downriver, appeared below my fly and slurped it in. This time I waited an extra half a second and got a good, solid hook set. The fish took off and I could see it was a nice Brown trout, about 22 inches, as it did a tailwalk heading away. It dove, then turned and came back up for a big jump, shaking heads head as it did so and spitting the hook.

It had been a great morning so far, plenty of action and all big fish. We hit a bit of a lull after that, and didn't touch another fish for a while. We started hitting the back end of the lake, which was probably a bit over a mile long. There were a series of coves here, and we would work our way down the left side, then Andreas would pull hard on the oars against the wind to get us back up to the point before dropping into the next cove. On the second cove, I suggested to John he should remember to look up and enjoy the scenery, which was spectacular. He did so, and before he could look back at his fly his rod was bent and a monster of a fish was pulling line out almost to the backing heading toward the rocky shoreline. Just as the fish neared an overhanging branch, the line went limp as the leader broke.

The wind was getting bad now, and Andreas was working hard to keep the boat in position. In the back of the boat I was rising nearly 3 feet with every swell. It was a good thing I don't get seasick! John and I both moved and missed a couple more fish, then we found ourselves at the downwind side of a long narrow cove. Andreas decided to try to start the motor to get us out of there, but the motor didn't want to start. He fought with it for a while, then gave up and went back to rowing. We continued fishing, and even with the big waves and crashing surf we each had another fish or two rise to swirl on our flies, though we were unable to connect.

Now it was getting towards 2:00, the time we'd agreed on to meet back at the launch for lunch. Again, Andreas tried to start the motor, but it just didn't want to cooperate. We took the motor apart and everything looked fine, put it back together and he was able to get it started. Whew. We motored up towards the main body of the lake and made it about 200 yards before the motored conked out again, leaving us stranded. We rowed over to the shore because the wind was too strong to get up the lake, then Andreas and I walked the boat along the shoreline to get around the next point. Andreas said the public access was close, so we fished our way there, without any further luck.



There Andreas went to build a fire to try to send a smoke signal to the other group, where we could see the two trucks parked a mile away at the far end of the lake. The area where we had stopped at the public access was unique in that it was a broad flat area, with some sandy bottom and looked in every way like an idyllic bonefish flat. With the white sand bottom, clear water, and chop from the wind it was like being on the flats, and I just couldn't resist.

I waded the flat like I would a bonefish flat, only because of the chop I didn't count on being able to spot fish so I would blind cast the big terrestrial towards promising looking water and twitch the fly back towards me. I could see John standing on the shore shaking his head at me like I was crazy...until I actually had a hit and was instantly hooked up with a lightning hot 18 inch rainbow trout. In the shallow water it was a good fight, the fish very strong and after a couple of acrobatic performances and several solid runs, I had her in my hands and was releasing her back into the lake. I flailed away in the wind for a few more minutes, then waded back in to help Andreas with the fire.

Even with the big winds, there was a fire pit built on the leeward side of a large push, and Andreas had a good fire going and was starting to put freshly pulled green grass on top of the flames to send up a column of smoke. The only problem was that because of the wind, the smoke just blew parallel to the trees and in the opposite direction, so we couldn't be sure the signal was visible to the guys on the other end of the lake, who were probably sitting there enjoying our lunch and drinking our beer.

We stayed at this for a while, constantly stoking the fire with fresh wood scrounged from the nearby trees and fresh green grass from along the roadway. Meanwhile we told stories and joked, keeping a positive air and appreciating the value of a good story as it was in the process of being created.

Just as Andreas was giving up on the smoke signal and resigning to trying to start the motor again – knowing it probably wouldn't work – we finally saw the two trucks leave the far side of the lake. We were saved!

We deflated the raft and 20 minutes later Andreas' truck pulls up with Eric and Kirk. They fed us a quick and very tasty lunch, we loaded everything into the truck, and drove the short 15 minutes over to the Rio Pico to try to squeeze in a few more hours of fishing.

The Rio Pico is a small classic freestone stream with lots of small, easily waded pebbles forming into shallow riffles and long medium-depth runs. It was a perfect trout stream. The water was up quite a bit from the rain they'd had last week, but we decided to try sticking with dry flies. I hooked and landed a small brown trout on my second cast, glad to be back in the game.

Andreas and Marty fished together, while Eric followed me around and we talked about fishing and fighting forest fires (his summer job) while I fought the powerful winds and tried to get a decent drift every now and then. I rose a handful of small trout, and did have one big fish about 16 inches come out of the water but miss my fly.

Eric and I hiked upstream from there, leapfrogging around John and Andreas who said they'd been hooking some fish on a hopper dropper setup. I had a couple of quick grabs on a streamer in the next run I fished, but missed them both, then hooked an overhanging willow and had to break the fly off.

I went back to a big attractor dry fly for the next spot, a shallow side channel pushing into a willow bush. I caught another brown trout there, then the truck caught up with us and it was time to go. Time had disappeared, and it was almost 8:00.

We changed out of our waders and broke down our rods, then piled back into the cab for the 30 minute drive back to the lodge. Overall it was a great day. We had an unforgettable story from the smoke-signal mishap, while still managing to see and hook some really big trout, and land a handful of nice fish besides.

Back at the lodge we cleaned up and showered, socializing with the others for a bit before dinner was served. Dinner started with a salad that I can't even describe and have no idea what was in it, but it was quite good. The next course was equally gourmet, a special cut of beef that was pounded and rolled up with roasted peppers then cooked like a pork loin, accompanied by some roasted potatoes. Simply fantastic. Dessert was a rich chocolate brownie sort of concoction. More stories from the days' fishing from the other folks around the table, then off to bed at well past 11:00.

Monday, January 9, 2017

We woke again as the sun came up, before our alarms. We got our gear ready for the day, then walked the few paces to the lodge for coffee and breakfast. By 9:00 am we were loading our gear into the trucks. Marty and Doug were fishing with Andreas and were going to float the Rio Pico, while John and I were with Martin and Marcela going to walk and wade a small spring creek called Terramotta (translates to "Earthquake") in the morning and a section of the Rio Las Pampas in the afternoon.

We bounced our way on rough two-track roads in four wheel drive up and over and around and through a variety of terrain and a handful more gates before pulling to a stop in a grove of *nire* trees next to a beautiful, winding freestone stream we learned was the Las Pampas.



We piled out of the truck and into our waders, rigged up our 6 weight rods with 3x leaders and big terrestrial dry flies, then started hiking up a cattle trail winding through short green grass and a maze of downed tree limbs. The trail came up to a high bank for a moment overlooking a tiny little side channel, and Martin spotted a big brown trout sitting upstream of us. It was packed with overhanging trees, very little room to make a cast. I stripped out some line and flipped it upstream. The first cast was too far to the right and the fish didn't see it, but the second cast landed the Fat Albert about a foot to the right of the fish. He twitched his tail, slid up in the water, and slurped the fly into his gaping mouth. I set the hook, but too soon and pulled the fly out of the fish's mouth.

We continued hiking and a short while further we crossed a small creek, maybe 3 feet across. I made a joke to Martin about making a cast. He laughed and said just wait, soon we would be catching big fish in water not much bigger than that!

Just upstream the narrow channel did indeed open up into a beautiful, small spring creek. It was still shallow, but with small deeper channels amongst the weeds and pools where it pushed against undercut banks. John started fishing one spot with Marcela, and I walked upstream a bit further with Martin until he spotted a nice brown trout cruising in the shallows.



The wind was howling, making casting a real challenge. We fished that pool for a few minutes, spotted several trout cruising and getting a few casts to them but with no success in getting

them to eat. Martin tied a small bead head pheasant tail on to a dropper below the big dry fly, and I got a couple of hits on the dropper but missed them.

John and I continued to leapfrog our way upstream, making a few casts into each pocket and pool. We were both getting some hits on the nymphs. The strikes were quick and we just couldn't connect. Every so often we'd spot another big brown cruising in the shallows. They were obviously feeding, but with the heavy winds and overcast skies spotting fish was tough and making casts with any degree of accuracy was even tougher. You could sense, however, if



the wind was even moderately reasonable and the skies were clear, this tiny spring creek would be simply amazing. There were plenty of big fish in there!

Finally I looked downstream and saw John hooked up with a big bend in his rod. Marcella netted it and I could see the bow of a heavy trout in the net.

Martin had hiked upstream a bit and whistled to me. He asked if I felt up for a hike and I said sure, so we trekked overland for about 10 minutes, then clambered over a wire fence before dropping back down to the creek where a small pool formed, maybe 5 feet long against a big rock framed with shallow water on either end. If a fish lived there, it had nowhere to go.

Martin said there was a huge brown trout that lived there, that he's seen a few times but only seen hooked once or twice and never landed. We would only have one chance. We stood way back, ducking low in the grass and making a 30 foot cast so that only the fly and leader would land on the water. My first cast landed just in front of the rock on the upstream end of the pool. The current was so slow it didn't drift at all, and after it dangled there for a few seconds without anything Martin said to cast again, this time to the middle of the pool. I made the cast, and the fly landed about 2 feet off the rock. The big terrestrial hovered there for a moment, then a big shadow appeared from the shade of the rock, slowly moving to the fly. The trout's white mouth opened wide, and it gulped in the fly. I actually waited to set the hook this time, and all hell broke loose in the tiny pocket of water. Martin ran down and practically dove in the water to get the big fish into the net as it thrashed against the weeds, and in a moment it was all over, a 23 inch, fat brown trout gasping in the bottom of the net. We unhooked it, then released it back into its narrow home pool.

We hiked back to the main part of the river, just as the sun broke through the clouds again. We approached the tailout of a shallow pool and spotted a nice fish cruising towards us along the edge of a weedbed. To get a fly in front of it, I would have to place a cast 30 feet with a powerful cross wind into a narrow, 18 inch channel. Next to impossible, but I had to try. My first cast landed about 2 inches too far to the right, and the fly hung up in a small overhanging bush. The fly dangled about 4 inches above the water, when suddenly a second fish emerged from under that same bush. It looked at the fly, the erupted out of the water...and completely missed the fly! How cool, though, just to see it try. Both fish were now spooked, so we walked back downstream to catch up with John and Marcella. John had landed several more nice fish.

It was lunchtime, so we hiked back to the truck and Martin and Marcella set up a table and chairs and we all enjoyed a great meal of beef Milanese and salad in the shadow of the *nire* grove with the Las Pampas bubbling a few yards beyond us.



After lunch, we swapped guides. John and Martin started fishing downstream. Marcella and I started fishing our way up. The Las Pampas was a totally different river, very clear and a classic, small freestone stream with riffles cascading into runs and pools, much of it lined in logjams. Classic water, and loaded with fish.

We had a Fat Albert and a nymph dropper, and immediately started catching fish. We continued catching fish all afternoon, too many to count. Most were rainbows, with a few browns mixed in. Most were on the dropper, but every once in a while a fish would splash up on the big dry fly. I gave the rod to Marcella to fish a bit and she caught a couple of fish, too.



We noticed a small channel coming into the side channel we were fishing, and we decided to walk up to explore and see what it looked like. The first pool above the main channel rewarded us in a couple of nice fish, so we kept walking up. The next pool up was a deeper pool, maybe 5 feet wide by 20 feet long. It was totally loaded with fish, and we pulled a handful of trout out of it, one after another after another. We even had a fish try to eat the dry fly while I was

fighting another fish on the dropper. Amazing to see so many nice fish in such a tiny little pocket of water. We kept hiking up to where we found a spring bubbling out of a dense grove of trees, but there wasn't any more water deep enough to hold fish.

We hiked back over to the main channel and fished a couple more spectacular runs, landing a few more fish before catching up with John and Martin, right at the time we had agreed upon to call it a day. How wonderful to have two very different experiences, the technical spring creek that was challenging but had some opportunities for sight casting to some really big fish, compared to the freestone stream with a lot of small to medium sized fish that didn't require a lot of special techniques. I can only image how great Terramoto could be with better conditions, more light for spotting fish and just a bit less wind to be able to make a decent cast.

We took our waders off and headed back to the lodge. Marty and Doug had a pretty good day, too, challenging because of the big winds (especially for Andreas trying to row a raft in the huge wind), but they caught plenty of fish, mostly on streamers. The rest of the guests also had decent fishing, while everyone mentioned it was one of the windiest days they'd seen in this part of Patagonia.

Dinner was another tasty fare, a first course of something I couldn't begin to describe but that tasted great, followed by a goulash and pasta main course and a delicious dessert topped with Dulce de leche. This chef is a veritable artist.

After dinner, Oggy had set up the Alabama versus Clemson NCAA championship game, which we watched for a bit then headed off to bed.

Tuesday, January 10, 2017

Day 3, and a bit harder to wake up this morning. The coffee was good and hot, breakfast hit the spot, and about the time both eyes were fully open we were loading our gear into the trucks to head out for the day. John and I would be fishing with Pancho, Marty and Doug with Pancho's brother Nico.

First we drove up the road about a half mile to Oggy's house to pick up the key to the estancia that that was home to the place they call "Africa". From there we drove up and over a couple of ridges to drop down into a spectacular open valley. They call it "Africa" because it literally looks like Africa, which didn't make sense until I saw it. It was a broad valley with a maze of channels from the spring creek that we would be fishing, with only a few small trees. It literally looked like it could have been straight out of the plains of Africa; the only thing missing were herds of elephants and giraffes, maybe a pride of lions.

The estancia here is owned by a traditional gaucho, who is 80 years old and a big landowner making him wealthy by most standards, but he still lives in the old way and works hard all year long. It was important to him that the guides all stop by his house every time they come to fish his estancia to say hello, so we stopped at his small house on the way down into the valley. He

wasn't there, but one of his sons was there on horseback. The guides all got out and said hello, then we continued down into the valley.

We stopped on a grass-lined ridge overlooking the creek. The river here was about 50 feet across. The wind was howling again and there was a heavy chop on the water, but you could still see the dense weedbeds characterizing the river bottom. The river flows down into this valley, then breaks up into the series of tiny channels that is the highlight of the fishery. John and I were going to start in the raft with Pancho fishing the main river, while Marty and Doug went down to fish a part of the channels. We would meet for lunch, then switch.

While the guides got the raft ready John and I started fishing from the shore, me with a hopper and John with a Fat Albert. He was whacking the fish one after another and I couldn't move a fish, so I changed my fly back to a Fat Albert...but I still couldn't coerce any fish to come up for it. He had the magic touch! When the raft was ready to go we got in.

We started floating upstream, which sounds weird but the flow of the river was opposite the flow of the wind so we actually were drifting upstream. We cast the big terrestrials either towards the bank, along the edges of the weedbeds, or towards any of the many willows that occasionally grew up along the shore. John netted a couple more nice fish, and eventually I managed to get one to rise and put it in the net, a 14 inch rainbow.

We continued fishing our way upstream; we would get a splashy rise here and there, but overall the fish weren't very active. I decided to switch to a big streamer, just as we got into a small area protected from the wind by big overhanging willows on both side of the stream. It was prime habitat for big meat-eating fish to hang out in! I did get one massive brown trout to come out from under one of the willows to attack my streamer but I promptly pulled the fly right out of its mouth. I did get a few more fish to chase the streamer, but never did land one.

Eventually we saw the other guys standing on a low bluff overlooking a horseshoe bend on the



river, so we rowed over and hiked up to where they had moved the trucks and set up another nice picnic lunch for us. We enjoyed some chicken fingers and potato salad, laughing at jokes and stories all the while.

Once lunch was finished, Marty and Doug took the raft to try the main channel, while we drove back downriver with Pancho and Jack to go try our luck in the braids.

We started off hiking downriver into the wind for about 15 minutes across the grass. When we came upon the first of several small braided channels we spooked a pair of pink flamingoes who took off right in front of us. John started fishing there with Pancho, while Jack and I crossed the narrow channel and hiked a bit further up to a spot where the flow of the creek formed several tiny finger channels, each about 2 feet wide. It was hard walking, trudging through the thick mud, but well worth it. I looked up and John was already hooked up into a nice trout.

Casting into the tiny channel with the heavy wind was a real challenge, but fortunately I was fishing with a 3x leader that had been cut back to the point where it was pretty much 2x or maybe even 1x diameter. I could barely fit it through the eye of the #14 Mercer's Missing Link. But the fish didn't seem to care, as most of the casts landed in the grass and I would have to violently wrench the fly free to try to re-cast. About every 5th cast would slap down on the water, with absolutely no finesse. Soon I was hooked up with a beautiful, fat, 16 inch brown trout in inches of water. Amazing. As challenging as it was to simply get the fly on the water...just about whenever I could make it happen there was a fish there willing to eat.

Every time I looked up John was also hooked up. Jack and I fished the various braids where I missed a couple more fish, then we took a different channel. It was at most 4 feet wide and a few inches deep. I would make a cast, and most of the casts ended up in the grass so I was thankful to be fishing such heavy terminal tackle so I could pull it out without breaking off. Every once in a while I would get lucky and the fly would land in the channel, and usually a fish would take. We fished fast upstream, and pulled a half dozen or so nice brown trout out of this incredible, small, intimate water.



Eventually the channel we were in joined the main channel, which was still only about 8 feet across. It was deeper here, with more weeds, maybe 2-3 feet deep in most places. The water looked much better and had to hold a ton of fish, but for whatever reason they weren't interested and we covered a lot of water with only the occasional rise until we caught up to John and Pancho. They had continued to fare well with John landing a bunch of nice trout on small dry flies. We crossed the channel downstream of them and cut through a thick grove of trees to a protected spot where we could spot a bunch of big trout sitting in the shallows. I made a few unsuccessful casts, then we decided because it was calmer here we should lengthen and lighten our tippet to 4x. We made the change, and the next cast brought up a nice 15 inch rainbow. I tried for some of the other bigger fish we could see holding in the pool, but after catching that fish they were onto us and were not interested so we continued slowly working upstream. I landed one more small rainbow, then it was time to head back for the trucks.

This Africa place is amazing, a unique feature and a very special place. It is spectacularly beautiful with the open valley surrounded in snow-capped peaks, while simultaneously remarkable in the tiny water, big fish, and dry fly fishing. Very special.

We drove back to the lodge, and enjoyed our final evening chatting with the other guests. Everyone was bummed with the much bigger than normal winds, but still enjoying pretty good fishing at the same time. Dinner was another artful presentation from chef Ezekial, a first course with some sort of guacamole with toast, and a main course of delicious shrimp lasagna. After dinner we packed our bags and get ready for our transfer to Chile in the morning.

Wednesday, January 11, 2017

This morning we had the excitement of knowing that we were entering the next leg of our journey, crossing the border into Chile to see some different terrain and different water. No one was sure if we'd be able to cross the Rio Pico, because it was so high from the recent rains. If not, we'd have to raft across and get meet the guides from Patagonian BaseCamp on the other side. It's not just any trip where you might clear Immigration and Customs in your waders!

We drove the 30 minutes to the border control station, a small concrete building behind a metal gate. There was one young woman there in army fatigues. She stamped our passports, then we drove another ten minutes to the Rio Pico. It was pretty big, but Andreas was able to wade across. It was up to his hips, but he still thought the Hilux could make it. First they went across with just the luggage, then returned to drive us across.



From there we drove another 20 minutes down a narrow dirt track through a thick maze of underbrush, so thick it was like driving through a tunnel with the walls inches from either side of the vehicle. It's hard to believe this was the "International Highway"! Soon we came to another river, this one smaller but with bigger boulders. Andreas drove us across, and as we got to the other side we saw a tan-colored Ford Excursion emerging onto the gravel bar.

We got out of the truck and met Fabian from PBC. We moved our luggage into the Excursion then drove another 15 minutes on a similar, rough dirt road until we opened up into the small town of Lago Verde. The Chilean border station there, and we went inside and got our passports stamped by the Chilean officials.

Now that we were legally in Chile, we got ready to go fishing. Doug and I were going to float the upper Figueroa and Marty and John were going to float the Rio Pico. Since the section of the Figueroa we would float had some heavy whitewater, we were told to wear waterproof pants instead of waders. We changed our clothes and organized our gear, then drove another 10 minutes along a gravel road to the put in.

The terrain here was entirely different from where we had woken up that morning. Whereas Argentina near Las Pampas was open with big mountains in the backdrop and a lot of short *nire* trees, on this side of the Andes everything was bigger and more closed in. The trees were taller, the mountains closer. Suddenly we were immersed in dense green rainforest.



The raft was already in the water. This was actually the lower end of the Rio Pico, which we would fish for about a mile before it dropped into the even larger Rio Figueroa. The Pico here was big, over a hundred feet across, big and swift: a powerful river, much different from the section we fished in Argentina just a couple of days before. It was clear but with a glacial tint, giving it that spectacularly beautiful emerald green color. It was hard to believe that less than 24 hours ago we were fishing a tiny spring creek that was less than 3 feet across, and today we were getting ready to float this big river.

We rigged up two rods each, one with a floating line and a big terrestrial, and one with a sink tip and a streamer. We got everything strapped down in the boat. Before we were ready to leave, Courtney gave us a good, in-depth safety talk about going through whitewater. We would have to wear helmets and life jackets when going through the two biggest rapids.

Once the safety talk was done, we pulled out into the current and started fishing. Since the water was so big, we mostly cast towards the edge of the river, or fished the edges and seams of the backeddies. I started off with a Black Fat Albert, Doug was fishing a Chubby Chernobyl. We rose a few fish but they didn't seem to be looking up, so Court decided to hang a rubberleg dropper below Doug's fly and instantly Doug was whacking fish, mostly rainbows from 10-15 inches. I stuck with the dry and did get a couple of fish to come up for it before we decided to switch to streamers. I fished an Autumn Splendor, and instantly started getting a lot of follows and hits.

As we continued down the river, the Rio Pico joined up with the even larger, more powerful Figueroa. We fishing our way down, trading off between the dry fly and dropper setup and streamers. The droppers were simply deadly, and I quickly lost count of how many fish Doug was catching. It was a LOT.

Soon we came up to the first big rapid, called El Diablo, and donned our helmets and life jackets. It was big water, pushing into a zig zag turn in a narrow channel. Below it we dropped into an incredible canyon with steep canyon walls. It was simply majestic, and you could understand why they call it the Temple. We continued downstream, past granite walls dripping with water and a handful of waterfalls that would have had hundreds of tourists a day in the US.

We dropped through the second rapid, called "Pinball". With the high flows from recent rains the big boulders that typically define the rapid were covered in big standing waves. Court handled the big water like a master oarsman, and soon we were fishing again. We continued downstream trading back and forth between streamers, dry dropper, and even sightcasting with dry flies to trout we could see cruising just below the surface, often against the backdrop of a sheer granite wall.

Eventually we turned a bend in the river and saw the Temple Camp on the right side of the river. The camp is amazing. A series of wooden steps leads up to the main building, which is a round wooden structure with a fireplace in the middle, a small kitchen, and a counter



for eating meals perfect for 4 guests. The wooden stairways continue up to two different “tent cabins”, spacious geometric dome styled heavy vinyl tents, each with two twin beds, a space heater, and in back a stone-lined open air bathroom and shower. It was a fancy camp. There’s power via generator, clean potable water via a gravity fed system with filters, and all the amenities you could ever want or hope for.

We had a tasty dinner, made by the guides from food prepared in advance by the chef at BadeCamp. Dinner was rice with seabass. After dinner we laughed and told stories, then made our way to bed with the sound of the Figueroa serenading us to sleep.



Thursday, January 12, 2017

Just as I started to stir in the morning, I heard the first few drops of rain on the wall of the tent. After breakfast we put our waders on. Marty and I would be fishing with Casper and David in a new spot that Marcel is exploring and starting to build another new outcamp, he calls Amsterdam.

We drove for 30 minutes before going through a locked gate, then dropping over a ridge that opened onto a spectacular view of a big lake. Lago Verde is aptly named, glimmering an emerald, glacial green. Mountains came straight up out of the lake on all sides.

There was a big jetboat parked in the shallows. It was a 22 foot aluminum boat with a 354 horsepower inboard jet drive, and a full cabin. We loaded everything from the truck into the boat, then fired up the big motor and jetted up the big lake. It was about a 30 minute boat ride. It was still raining, and the clouds obstructed a lot of the view but you could still sense the grandeur of the place with the granite outcrops and countless waterfalls.

At the far end of Lago Verde we pulled up to a small cabin. We started hiking from the camp, down a narrow trail overhanging with thick vegetation, most of it with thorns. It's amazing that while there are no predators or dangerous animals in this part of the world, it seems that nearly every plant is covered in thorns and out to get you. We crossed a couple of small channels, then stopped near a small section of the stream where it curved around a bend with a riffle on the top and a narrow deep channel on the far side with an undercut bank and overhanging branches. The whole creek was only about 30 feet across. It started raining harder.



We started off with big dry flies and droppers. In that first run, I did hook a nice rainbow. As it spit the hook, an even bigger brown trout moved up from the shadow of an overhanging tree. I switched up to a streamer and went through the run again but couldn't get the monster brown to come out and play. I fished my way downstream, hitting one narrow deep channel where I hooked and landed four rainbows in a row, from 14-16 inches.

Marty caught a nice fish in the run below me. Both Casper and David were talking about how when it's clear out and they've been here before they spot a lot of fish and usually sight cast here with dry flies. Not today in the rain.

We continued trudging through the rain and thick overgrowth, scouting out a maze of cattle trails through the thick rainforest. Given that to get here we'd had to motor across the lake, and the terrain was punctuated on all sides by massive peaks, I couldn't figure out how they'd possibly gotten the cattle in here – and out of here since we never saw an actual cow – in the first place.

We found a few pockets of the creek we could fish, and in one pool Marty hooked a couple of fish. After he'd worked it with the dry dropper I tried the streamer and moved a couple of fish as well. We explored a series of other small channels, then made our way back to where the small creek joined the larger glacial river to form a well-defined color line. We fished the confluence there, and Marty landed a few more fish on the dropper. I changed the tan streamer to a black Home Invader, and hooked a nice, silver-sided brown trout, about 17 inches.

The skies got dark, the wind picked up, and it started raining again, so we decided to call it a day. Back at camp, we hung our wet gear to dry and enjoyed the warm dining cabin with a

toasty fire. Casper and Mark cooked dinner, steak and potatoes with salad. We were all tired, and hit the sack early, hoping for better weather tomorrow.

Friday, January 13, 2017

The sun was shining through the octagonal window in our domo when we woke up this morning, a little past seven o'clock. After the wet, rainy day yesterday it was a great sight to see. After breakfast, Doug and I loaded our gear into one of the trucks, and helped Court and Mark load a raft onto the back. We were going to head up to float the Rio Pico, taking out just above where we put in the first day.

We drove up the road about 30 minutes back into the small town of Lago Verde, where we had crossed the border from Argentina just a few days ago. We drove through the town, turning left and down a dirt track past a field where several gauchos were cutting hay.

Soon the road came up to a bridge across the Rio Pico. We unloaded the raft and put it in the water. Both Doug and I rigged up 6 weight rods with floating lines. He tied on a small Gypsy King and I tried a smaller stonefly pattern.

The Rio Pico here was probably 100 feet across, a classic mountain freestone stream. It was lined with bowling ball and bigger shaped rocks, mostly shallow and characterized by riffles and pocket water. It was still cool and the wind was picking up again. We started off casting towards the bank, and immediately Doug was getting hits on the Gypsy King but the fish were mostly slapping at it instead of taking it. I didn't get anything on the smaller fly, so changed it up to a black Fat Albert. Court put a brown rubberleg dropper on Doug's dry, and he instantly started hooking fish after fish. I rose a few on the big terrestrial and landed a couple, but still nothing like the action that Doug was getting so I added a dropper with a Prince Nymph below it and I, too, started whacking fish.

It was a good mixture of browns and rainbows, ranging from 8-15 inches. Not big fish, but loads of them and they were super aggressive. In the crystal clear water, you could see every take, even on the nymph droppers.

We were catching enough fish that I decided to try something different. I cut off the dropper and tried a tan Pool Toy hopper pattern. I





rose a few fish, but was still hooking one to every 10 that Doug was hooking. He had switched to a Thing from Uranus, sticking with the rubberleg dropper. Most of the fish were on the dropper, but he was rising some good fish to the dry, too.

I decided to try a big Gypsy King. Court suggested rather than dead drift it to switch it across the surface, basically fishing it like a mouse. It was very affective, and although Doug was still hooking three to my one I was now in steady action as well.

We stopped for lunch on a sandy beach. Lunch was chicken pesto pasta, which the guides had made the night before. Tasty, and well complimented with a cool beer. After lunch we continued floating, and it was easily one of the

silliest afternoons of fishing I've ever had. We rarely went for more than a few yards without hooking a fish. We had at least a dozen or more double hookups. We landed a few bigger fish over twenty inches, too. It's hard to imagine how many fish we landed. Lots and lot and lots. The fun part was how visual it was, seeing every take, often watching the fish come up from the bottom, chase the fly and swipe at it two or three times before eating it.

We hit the takeout, loaded up our gear and the boat, then drove back to the Temple Camp. We enjoyed stories and a tasty dinner of lamb, quinoa, and salad.

Saturday, January 14, 2017

Blue sky greeted us as we looked out the portal of the domo this morning. We packed our things, then headed down for the usual breakfast of scrambled eggs. Marty and I rigged up at the Temple Camp and started fishing right from the lodge to float the lower Figueroa, with Mark as our guide.

The river had dropped at least three feet since we'd arrived at the camp, and although it was still glacial in color it was considerably more clear than it had been when we floated the upper section just a couple of days ago. Hopefully with the sun out we would have more fish on the surface.

We rigged up two rods, one with a big Gypsy King and a rubberleg dropper, the other with an Autumn Splendor on a sink tip. We started off with the dry dropper setup, fishing the seams and river edges. We pulled in a few fish on the droppers right off the bat, a good start to the day.

As we continued working our way down river, we changed back and forth from the dry dropper to the streamers. Overall the dry dropper seemed to work better, with most of the fish coming on the nymph but a few rising to the big dry fly. We moved a few fish on the streamers, too. By lunchtime we had landed a fair number of fish, mostly in the 10-15 inch range.

It was a beautiful day, the first time all week that I was able to fish without a jacket. Mark set out a nice spread with tortillas, chicken, and sliced cucumbers and carrots to make a fresh soft taco lunch.

The wind started to pick up, blowing right up



river into our faces and making for some challenging casting. Still, we managed to have a good afternoon with consistent action, a fair mix between fish rising to the big dry fly and fish taking the dropper below it. At one beautiful bend in the river, I got out of the boat to take some photos from the shore, with emerald green water and towering snowcapped mountains in the background. Marty landed 6 or 7 fish, on cue, mostly nice sized trout from 14-16 inches. I got back in the boat and we fished that same back eddy for a few more minutes, each of us landing a couple more fish before we moved on downriver.

We switched to streamers for a while and managed to catch a few more fish. Before too much longer we hit the takeout. Fabian pulled up with the truck and trailer. We loaded the boat onto the trailer, drove back up to the Temple Camp, changed out of our waders, grabbed our luggage, and started off for the hour and a half drive north to the Patagonian Basecamp lodge.

We drove along the Figueroa, then past several different lakes all known to host big trout that liked to eat dry flies. I am constantly amazed at the incredible diversity of fishing options here.

An hour into the drive the road turned to pavement as we met the famous Carretera Austral. At the crossroad of the paved road and the gravel road one could turn left and drive a few kilometers into La Junta, the closest small town to the lodge. We turned right, and eventually the road continued on to Chaiten. We drove another 20 minutes before the road turned to gravel again.

As we drove we saw the massive Rio Rosselot, then the Rio Palena after the Rosselot joined it. Soon we turned left onto a narrow gravel track towards the lodge. To the left we saw the first signs of the farm, with a pair of llamas in one field, a bunch of chickens in a big coup in another, and a handful of pigs.

We pulled up to the main lodge at PBC, and Marcel came out to greet us and say hello, followed instantly by the lodge hostess, Kelly. Kelly showed us to our rooms. I settled in, then headed downstairs to meet the other guests. There were four other guests, Ron and his son Tucker, their uncle Gary, and Elliot.

We sat outside, with the Rio Palena coursing by just a couple hundred feet away. Soon Kelly called us in for dinner. We enjoyed a tasty meal of salad with fruit, pork loin, and a scrumptious dessert of peach mousse. After dinner we retired to the comfort of our rooms, excited for another exciting day of exploring new water in search of trout.



Sunday, January 15, 2017

The sun beaming through the windows woke me up just before 7 this morning. Soon after I met the rest of the group downstairs for hot coffee and a tasty breakfast of eggs to order, fruit, and all sorts of other tasty treats. We gathered our gear and soon everyone was loading up into a variety of vehicles parked in front of the lodge, several Toyota Hilux's and an FJ cruiser, each hooked up with a boat of some sort on trailer.

The truly amazing thing here at PBC is the incredible diversity of options to fish. A couple of the guys were going up to fish the lower Figueroa, taking out in the Lago Rosselot. Marcel was going to meet up with one of the guys staying at Temple Camp to float the lower Temple float that we had done the day before. Two other guys were going to fish a lake. John and Doug were going to hike into a lake known for big fish. Marty and I were going with Ben to take a jet sled up the Rio Palena.

We drove for only about twenty minutes down the gravel road to a put in where we launched the boat in the Rio Frio. From there we motored down the Frio for about 10 minutes before it met up with the Palena. The Frio is a glacial river, milky green in color, but the Palena was clear. We motored another 30 minutes way up the Palena, before Ben pulled up to a sandy beach and killed the motor.

We rigged up there, Marty with a sink tip and a streamer and me with a big Gypsy King on a floating line. Ben pulled the boat out into the current and started rowing, keeping the boat about 30-40 feet off the bank. I rose two nice fish right off the bat, both about 15 inches. Marty had a big brown swipe at his streamer a couple of times but it didn't eat. We continued this way, gradually working our way downstream on the oars, occasionally firing up the jet and motored a short distance to the other side of the river or to a new stretch just downstream.

The fishing wasn't red hot, but we would consistently move a fish every so often, enough action to keep us busy. Before we knew it, it was lunchtime. We pulled up to a small gravel bar and set up a table and chairs, enjoying a tasty shore lunch.

After lunch we pulled back out in the river. Ben pulled into a swirly backeddy. We could see fish suspended in the deep water just a few feet below the surface, and both Marty and I hooked and landed several nice fish, each of us also missing a couple of really nice rainbows in the 18 inch range that ate our flies...after we'd pulled them out of their mouth.

We spent a good hour in the first of these swirls, and landed a handful of fish sightcasting to them on the surface, which was really fun. We moved downriver, back to the big dry and streamer combo but without much luck until we came into another eddy where there were more suspended fish. I landed two more rainbows here on the Fat Albert; Marty got a nice one, too.

The rest of the afternoon was demanding fishing, me casting the big dry against the bank and Marty stripping the streamer through all sorts of beautiful water. We hooked, landed, and released a few more nice fish. It was a spectacularly beautiful day, made that much more so by the sheer beauty of the river and the scenery around us. The water curved and bended, and was set against a backdrop of thick forested mountains with one big rocky, snow-covered mountain in the background. This is an amazing place.

We fished our way downstream until we came back to the mouth of the Frio, then fired up the jet motor and pattered back up to the launch. Ben put the boat on the trailer, and twenty minutes later we were back at the lodge in time for Marcel to give me a quick tour of the lodge.



Patagonian Basecamp is a real testament to vision and craftsmanship. Marcel and Carolina have built everything by themselves over the past 17 years. The lodge is set on the banks of the Rio Palena, nestled amidst an idyllic, fully functioning farm complete with gardens for the produce they eat every day including all sorts of fruits and vegetables, as well as pastures for cows, pigs, chickens, turkey, sheep, horses, and even a couple of

llama. While the horses and llamas are mostly for fun, the rest is a true farm operation and although I didn't know this before PBC is a real farm-to-table operation with almost everything served there grown and raised on the farm.

The lodge itself features 8 double occupancy bedrooms with en suite baths. It's a three story building, with half of the rooms downstairs and half upstairs, plus a third story loft with an exercise room and one more spacious bedroom, the "honeymoon suite". Also downstairs is a wader room, with buckets set up outside to disinfect wading boots from potential invasive species. The main lodge room is open and spacious with a fly tying desk, small bar area, big indoor fireplace central to the room, and the long dining room table where we enjoyed our fantastic meals. Outside is a covered patio with more tables and comfortable chairs, perfect for enjoying cocktails and appetizers and fishing stories from each day's adventures.

A wooden walkway leads from the wader room deck into the woods where Marcel has built a lovely sauna. The boardwalk continues down a short stairway to an open air, wood-fired hot tub overlooking the river. Just beyond that they have a domo tent set up as a massage room, and they can set up with advance notice a masseuse to come in from La Junta.

Adjacent to the main lodge is Marcel and Carolina's home, and a bit past that is the guides' area, where there is a huge "boat shed" filled with a dozen or more various rafts, drift boats,

and jet boats, along with more trucks, vans, and vehicles. There's a literal fleet of vehicles and craft to make this complicated operation run so smoothly.

We returned to the lodge and joined the rest of the guests for cocktails and appetizers, and soon Kelly was calling us in for dinner. It was another wonderful meal, opening with a cheesy escargot appetizer that was nameless but delicious, followed by a white fish wrapped in bacon and complemented finally with a lemon mousse dessert. We regaled each other with stories and jokes, and soon it was time to head off to bed.

Monday, January 16, 2017

When I woke up this morning, the sun which had visited us the past two mornings was gone, replaced by gray skies and a drizzling rain. Marcel had warned us the night before, so it was no surprise. Marty and I were going to the Rio Claro, which was Marty's favorite river. I couldn't wait to see it.

We ate breakfast and pulled on our waders, then climbed into Marcel's FJ Cruiser with a raft hooked up on the back, Marty and myself, plus Sandford our guide and Carolina who would shuttle the truck and trailer back to the lodge after we launched the boat. It was about a 40 minute ride to the put in on the Rio Claro. We put the boat in the water, rigged up our rods with sink tip lines and streamers, and soon were in the water floating downstream.

The Rio Claro is a spectacularly beautiful trout stream. Where we started, it was relatively small water, maybe 60 feet across in a dense rainforest with countless underwater logs serving as structure for fish on both banks. Sandford rowed us down river, slowing the boat as we cast into the banks and stripped the streamers over the tops of the many logs hoping for big fish to come up out of holding lies in the structure to eat the meat we were tossing at them.

Over the course of the morning we tried a handful of different streamers, including Autumn Splendors, Chile Buggers, Home Invaders, and Sparkle Minnows. Every fly moved fish. The fish were acting a bit strange, however, no doubt related to the cold weather and pouring down rain. A lot of the fish would charge the fly repeatedly but wouldn't commit to eating. But we managed to coax more than a few into taking the fly, and were in some sort of constant action for most of the morning. Most of the fish were small in the 10-14 inch range, but still fun to watch come out and try to eat the streamers.

I did have one big fish, well over 20 inches, suddenly appear over a series of logs and stalk the fly. It wasn't the aggressive take I'm used to with streamers, more of a slow, deliberate eat. Which of course meant I pulled the fly right out of its mouth.

All in all, it was a miserable morning for weather and a great morning for fishing with plenty of action. We stopped for lunch under a canopy of trees that gave us a brief respite from the elements. With the cold, wet weather, they'd packed a perfect lunch of hot soup in a thermos. It really hit the spot.

After lunch we continued downstream, and here the river started to change. There were still plenty of sections with submerged logs, but the river was growing larger as we continued downstream, fed by multiple small tributaries coming in. We came through a series of moderate rapids, while the river also showed us some fun sections of pocket water which produced some good grabs from fish. In the faster current of the boulder gardens, they couldn't swipe and follow the fly like they'd been doing in the slower moving runs, so here they attacked and ate with more aggression.

Not long after lunch I saw a large shadow appear beneath my fly, a big brown that slowly took the black Home Invader. Somehow I didn't pull the fly away from this one, and was hooked up to the biggest fish I'd seen in several days. It started off fighting down and dirty, hugging the bottom and refusing to move. I applied a lot of pressure, finally getting it up off the bottom and then it jumped, right next to the boat, at least 3 feet in the air. As Sandford got the net under it the hook slipped out, so we never got a photo but certainly had a good look at the fish – easily 23 inches – a healthy, fat, buttery-colored brown trout.

The trout continued to move to the streamers throughout the afternoon. About 4 o'clock the Rio Claro joined up with the massive Rio Rosselot, a big river with a lot of glacial influence, no longer the small, clear, intimate river of the Claro. Sandford rigged a second rod up for Marty with a Chubby Chernobyl and a rubberleg dropper because he had a few backeddies here he liked to fish. The first eddie was right where the Claro dumped in. Marty landed one nice fish on the dropper blind casting and drifting it in the foam.

We continued down the big river fishing streamers, and had some really good success with a handful of 16-18 inch trout. Although the river was much larger and not as clear as the Rio Claro, the fishing was the same, casting in towards the bank and stripping the fly back towards the boat. We came into a second backeddie, and again Marty hooked a couple of nice fish on the dry dropper setup, blind casting into the swirly seam.

With the takeout in sight below us, we came into one last big eddy, where there was a thick scum line filled with debris. Suddenly we started spotting trout holding like grey ghosts just under the surface, cruising in the scum line and occasionally slurping bugs off the surface. It was fun sightcasting, and Marty hooked 5 or 6 fish there, mostly an oar length away from the boat, so it was exciting fishing and a lot of fun to watch. I'd heard all week about fishing the scum lines and though we'd seen a fish here and a fish there, this was the first time I'd really seen it in full action with a bunch of fish consistently holding and feeding in the water just inches below the surface. It was a great way to end our time at Patagonian BaseCamp.

We rowed down to the takeout, where Marcel was there with a truck and trailer ready to go. We unloaded the gear from the raft and put it on the trailer, then drove back 20 minutes to the lodge.

We enjoyed a tasty dinner of venison (red stag shot by a friend of Marcel's), and a couple of hours of wine and jokes and conversation.

It's been an incredible trip already, made that much more special by the amazing camaraderie between Marty, Doug and John. They're fantastic fishing and travel companions, and loads of fun to be around. With tough weather, and a mixture of great fishing days with slow fishing days, it shows that with the right group of friends and well managed fishing operations, even tough conditions can't stop you from having a remarkable, fun, and memorable trip.

Patagonian BaseCamp is a great program. The logistics are incredibly complicated, a testament to Marcel's die-hard attitude for finding new and exciting fishing. And they've surrounded themselves with great people, from Marcel and Carolina, to the guides, to the staff and team including Kelly and Fabian at BaseCamp. People can keep coming back here and always have new options, while also re-visiting some old favorites. And they know they'll be well taken care of from start to finish.

Tuesday, January 17, 2017

I was packed and ready to go by 8:00, when I headed downstairs to have a final breakfast at Patagonian BaseCamp. After breakfast I said goodbye to everyone and started off on the next leg of my Chilean adventure. Fabian and Kelly were driving in to Aysen to get fuel and do some shopping, so three of us piled into the big flatbed F350 for the long, bumpy drive.

Much of the Carretera Austral is unpaved, although they are working on paving new sections every year. The Chilean government has mandated the construction to connect Chile and improve infrastructure for tourism and commercial development in the region. It's incredibly difficult terrain with the rocks and mountains and weather and there have been constant delays. Still, progress continues, and each year more and more is paved. It won't be long before it is all good road, reducing transfer times, minimizing wear and tear on vehicles, and making life just a bit easier for everyone who lives in the region. Although, it will also open the road for development, so future battles are sure to be waged fighting dam construction (some such battles have already begun as the HydroAisen dam project was shut down by local protests in 2014) and other modes of development.

It was raining hard again, so the sky was dark and the massive peaks and glaciers that typically dominate the landscapes along the road were hidden from view. Still, it was a spectacular drive, along a handful of beautiful rivers, through countless canyons and valleys all rich with verdant rainforest and dramatic rock outcroppings. We passed the village of La Junta, then 45 minutes later the town of Puyuhuapi, which was perched on the coast. From Puyuhuapi south there wasn't much but potholed gravel road, big falling rocks, road construction, and hundreds of cascading waterfalls on all sides. We climbed up and over a mountain pass through a national park, finally dropping down on the other side through the village of Amengal. We passed the Cisnes River, and 5 hours after we'd started we came to the crossroads where the road turned west towards Aysen and south on to Coyhaique.

Ilsie from Trouters was there waiting for me. I moved my luggage from the back of the big truck to Ilsie's Toyota Hilux, then said goodbye to Fabian and Kelly. Ilsie drove me another 45 minutes towards Coyhaique. The topography here was quite different, more open with broad sweeping valleys. The gauchos had burned out much of the forest dozens of years ago, leaving what was now fertile grasslands populated by many farms with cattle, sheep, and horses.

We dropped over a ridge with the Rio Simpson in a gorge below us, and I could see the city of Coyhaique in the distance below us, built up against the base of a mountain in a big valley bisected by the Rio Simpson and the Rio Coyhaique. Just before we came into the city, Ilsie turned left up a steep gravel road, and less than a minute later we were pulling into the lodge. We got out and I met Ilsie's uncle, Pablo, and her cousin, Coca (a nickname, short for Veronica). They showed me to my room, and gave me a quick tour of the lodge.

La Reserva Lodge is a brand new building, which Nico and Ilsie opened for their angling guests at Trouters just two years ago. It is spacious and very clean. The entryway opens up into a small reception area and a big main room with open bar, buffet and dining tables, with an open kitchen where you can watch the chefs at work. There's a stairway leading downstairs to a social room/bar area that they are still finishing up, but will be nice when it's finished with some comfortable chairs and a big long bar.

To the right from the front entrance a wide hallway leads to the guest rooms. There are 5 spacious rooms, each double occupancy with two queen beds and an en suite bath. Each room has a small balcony looking out on the valley below with spectacular, panoramic views. They have adapters in the room if you need it, and good WiFi. There is a closet, coat rack, and a bag for laundry if you need any done.

I dropped off my bags, then Ilsie, Coca and I drove the 2 km into town for lunch. Ilsie parked in the main square, Plaza de Armas, and we walked down a busy commercial area, an outdoor mall with a lot of shops and restaurants. Coyhaique has a population now of about 60,000, and is a big tourist zone for adventure travelers hiking the



glaciers, trails, or riding bikes on the Carretera Austral. There's even a Patagonia store here, right across the avenue from a North Face store!

We stopped at a small pizzeria called Mamma Gaucha. The place was packed with people eating and drinking and laughing. I sampled a locally brewed Porter, and an Italian style pizza. Satiated for now, we took a stroll around downtown Coyhaique. After spending 10 days in the rural wilderness of the Las Pampas area in Argentina and the even more remote areas around Temple Camp and Patagonian BaseCamp, it was a shock to see so many people out and about. In the main square, six young Chileans, probably high school age, were dressed in colorful costumes and performing traditional dances to music, each dance telling a story. There was a small craft fair as well, with a lot of woven products, sweaters, shawls, and hats.



We returned to the lodge to wait for the other guests to return from their fishing days. At about 6:30 I heard footsteps in the hallway, and a soft knock on my door. Standing there was Bruce, a friend from Red Bluff who I'd be fishing with for the next week. He was joined by one of the guides, Sebastian, who had been fishing with him for the past few days. We chatted for a bit and made a game plan for the next day's fishing.

Appetizers are served at 7:30, and I enjoyed a homemade Pisco Sour from Pablo while I waited for the other guests to arrive. Soon I was introducing myself to Gary and Vickie from Seattle, and Andrew from the east coast. They had all been here for a few days, and have been enjoying themselves. The weather had been pretty tough with off and on rain and big winds, making for challenging conditions. Still, everyone had caught some nice fish and enjoyed the guides, food, area, and experience.

Soon dinner was served, starting with a plate of empanadas, followed by a fresh green salad. The main course was a giant hunk of steak, so thick it looked more like a massive piece of pie than a cut of meat. It was delicious. Dessert was equally scrumptious, some sort of creamy blueberry concoction. After the meal I sampled one of Pablo's famous digestivo's. It's called Araucana, named for the indigenous peoples who once populated southern Chile. It was thick with herbs and black in color, and tasted a bit like Frenet. Not something everyone would like, but it did help soften the heavy meat dish.

Wednesday, January 18, 2017

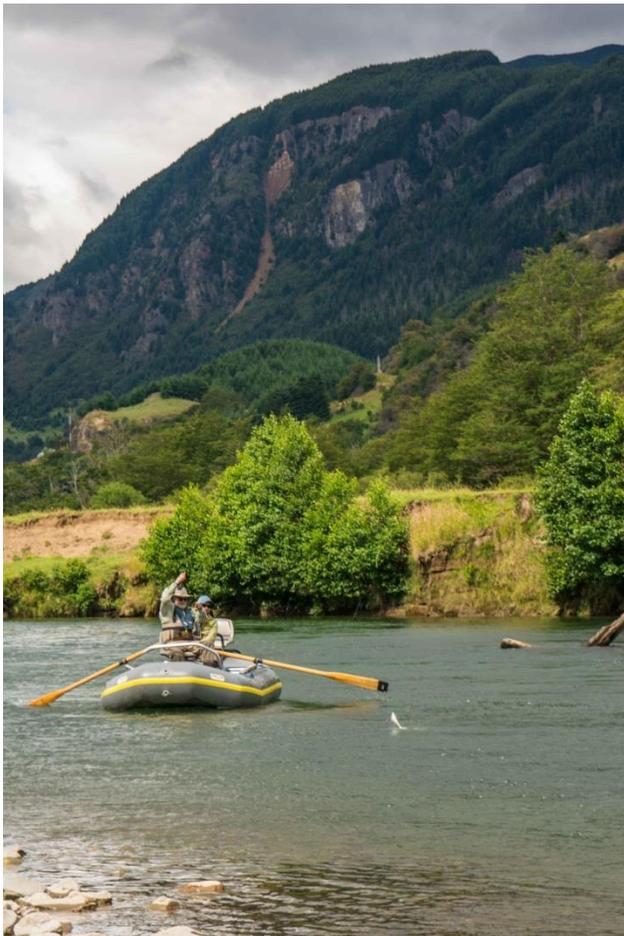
I woke at 7 am, got my fishing stuff ready, and walked down to the dining room for breakfast before 8:00 am. They had a buffet table set up with some sweet pastries, fruit, cereals, yogurt, meats and cheeses, and brought out scrambled eggs as well. A full spread.

I returned to my room after breakfast and grabbed my gear. I walked out front to meet Sebastian, who was Nico's brother and had guided in the region for many years, with 8 years guiding at Patagonia Drifters before Nico started Trouters.

We would be floating the upper section of the Manihuales. It was a little over an hour's drive from the lodge, going back over much the drive that I had done the day before on my way in to Coyhaique. It was one of the furthest sections of river they fish, but a good choice because



many of the rivers were still high because of the recent rains. While we drove Sebastian told us about all of the different options they have there to fish, and I am really impressed with the diversity of scenarios they can present for their angling guests. They have a lot of rivers they can float including a few sections of the Manihuales, several floats on the Rio Simpson and the Rio Aysen, a section of the upper Nireguao, and a handful of smaller wading streams, plus several lakes. Many options!



We launched the raft. It was still cloudy, a bit rainy, and windy. We rigged up streamer rods with sink tips to start, and soon pulled out into the current. Sebastian prefers smaller streamers, basically small #8 wooly buggers in black or olive. It didn't take long to start hooking fish, and all morning we were in constant action. The fish were an even mix of browns and rainbows. What they lacked in size they made up for in gusto, fighting like fish twice their size. It gradually started to warm and the wind died out, and every once in a while the sun would pop out. We pulled over and rigged up a couple of dry fly rods with Fat Alberts, and fished a few sections with the dries. We rose a few fish, but it wasn't as productive as the streamers so we switched back.

We continued hooking fish after fish after fish until lunch time. It was a very productive morning. For lunch, Sebastian laid out a nice spread that Ilesie had prepared with wine, a

cup of soup, a fresh salad, plus a potato salad, and what they called a tortilla and was like a frittata.

After lunch, we continued switching back and forth between streamers and dry flies, but the streamers were so much more effective that it was hard to stay with the dry for very long. The winds died out and the sun made infrequent appearances. We caught a lot of fish. The average size was considerably higher after lunch, with most of the fish in the 14-16 inch range, including a few bigger fish in the 18-20 inch class. We tried to guess how many fish we'd hooked, but all we knew was that we were at 7 double hookups, and best guess was over 80 fish landed with many more seen moving to the fly in the clear waters. The Manihuales is one of the prettiest rivers I've ever fished, medium in size and a mixture of shallow flats and deep runs, with lots of sections with submerged logs and structure, perfect habitat for a high population of fish.

The sun was out when we came to the takeout. We loaded the raft onto the trailer, took off our waders, loaded our gear into the back of the SUV, then settled in for the long drive back to the lodge. I fell asleep in the back seat, exhausted from a great day on the water, and soon we were dropping back down into the Coyhaique valley and pulling up to the lodge on the hill.

The other guests, Andrew, Gary, and Vickie had all floated the Simpson and has also all had a great day of fishing, with numerous fish on streamers. Gary and Vickie also hit one stretch of water where the fish were on the surface, and Vickie landed a beautiful big brown that looked to be 23 inches and very fat in the photo they shared around a tasty round of appetizers. It was their last day, so great for them to end it on such a high note.

Dinner was seafood, starting with a first course of a baked abalone dish that was simply delightful, followed by a fresh salad and a main course of fresh salmon with potatoes. After dinner Pablo persuaded us to sample more his favorite digestive after dinner drink, Araucana. Everyone turned in for the night, and I stayed up for a bit chatting with Nico, Pablo, and Coca about Chile and family. What a great group of people to have an opportunity to spend some time with.

Thursday, January 19, 2017

The day started with another tasty breakfast, and soon Bruce and I were in Carlos' truck heading out for a day of floating and fishing on the lower section of the Rio Simpson. Chino, one of the other guides who works with Nico, would be on the same float, fishing with Andrew. The drive to the launch took about 30 minutes.

It was a beautiful start to the day, with surprisingly no wind. The skies were overcast, but with the calm weather it was comfortable and quite nice. Bruce started with a Chubby Chernobyl and a red copper john dropper. I started with a sink tip and an Autumn Splendor streamer. In the first pool I didn't move any fish though there were a few rising and Bruce caught a couple of small rainbows.

We continued fishing downstream, and Bruce was catching a lot of nice fish on the dropper. I switched out the streamer for a similar Chubby with a dropper. We pulled over to one spot and Carlos held the boat for Bruce to fish a riffle on the main channel while I got out and waded a small side channel with big boulders and nice pocket water. I hooked three small fish, then saw a large trout slurping on the far side. I made a long cast, and a fish took the Chubby but I missed it. I cast back into the seam on the far side, and a fat 16 inch rainbow took the dropper.

I got back in the boat and we continued fishing our way downstream, rising fish after fish on the dry dropper setup. Bruce was doing especially well, including a nice rainbow a bit over 20 inches. Most of the fish were of decent size, averaging 14-16 inches.

The Rio Simpson is another beautiful river. It is slightly larger than the section of the Manihuales we fished yesterday, though not as clear. It is characterized by beautiful riffles, some great sections of pocket water with big boulders, some deep pools where the river flows against big rock bluffs, and some nice willow lined banks with plenty of submerged logs for cover for rainbows and browns. We caught fish in every type of water. The backdrop is equally stunning, as the river courses around a big rocky outcrop called the "English Muffin" because it looks like a big muffin with a tuft of trees on the top of the massive two thousand foot high rock. To the left the towering wall of Las Torreones (the towers) paralleled the river valley, with a series of big waterfalls cascading down the rocky ridgeline in several places.



Just before lunch we hit a broad, slow, deep section of the river where we saw several nice trout slowly slurping emerging caddis off the surface. We changed up to small dry flies and tried to get them to eat, but with no wind the fish on this calm flat were very spooky and although we tried several flies we never could get an eat.

We stopped for lunch at a gravel bar decorated with wildflowers, at the tailout of the flat where the fish had been raising and just upstream of where another small creek joined the river. The guides set out tables and chairs, soup and a fresh salad, and even cooked some delicious filets wrapped in bacon. Over the top!



After lunch I decided to try a bigger streamer and see what might happen. I tied on a Sparkle Minnow, and started chucking it out and stripping it back fast. For the first 45 minutes, Bruce caught fish after fish on the dry dropper setup while I didn't move a fish. But suddenly the roles reversed when we hit a section of pocket water, scattered with downed logs and big submerged boulders. For the next 30 minutes I hooked big fish after big fish on the streamer, mostly in the 16-20 inch range, and moved a couple of even larger fish that I missed. For some reason, in this section the fish wanted the streamer, as Bruce didn't get anything on the dropper that had been so successful only a few minutes before. Eventually the fish turned back onto the dropper and I switched back over. The rest of the afternoon was great fishing with numerous more fish hooked and landed. Overall, we saw mostly rainbows on the dry dropper setup, while the streamers moved mostly browns.

We hit the takeout, a sandy ramp underneath an orange suspension bridge. We loaded up the rafts onto the trailers and drove back to the lodge. I showered up, then met up with Bruce and Andrew and our new guest, Mike. Dinner started with a beef soup, then another fresh salad, and a main course of a potato, tuna, egg, and all sorts of other delicious things baked into a "cake". Hard to describe, but very tasty. Dessert was a crepe with fresh picked wild strawberries.

Friday, January 20, 2017

We had an early breakfast and were on the road at 8:15 this morning, in Nico's truck driving down to float the lower Rio Simpson. The day started out windy but warm and with high clouds and patches of blue sky.

While Nico launched the boat, we rigged up the same setups we had been fishing yesterday with hopper droppers on one rod and streamers on the other. Bruce started off with the dry dropper setup, while I opted for chucking a Sparkle Minnow. I hadn't even unhooked my fly when Bruce flipped his line out and was instantly hooked up into a nice 16 inch rainbow.

We continued fishing this way for the first hour or so. In spite of the quick start, we saw only the occasional fish moving to either the nymph or the streamer, nothing like the action we'd had the day before just upstream. I was moving more fish with the streamer, so Bruce switched over and tried a streamer as well. For kicks I tied on the "Meatball", a fly that one of the other guests at the lodge, Andrew, had tied up, basically grey wooly bugger but with a secret, special blend of dubbing featuring coyote, raccoon, and beaver. It worked pretty well and I moved two big fish and landed a few smaller fish in no time. Soon I lost the Meatball in a tree, and switched to a Chile Bugger.

Right about then we came to a big foam line where Nico hoped to see some fish rising. We stopped, changed up one of the dry fly rods to a Missing Link, and Nico and Bruce went looking for rising trout. They didn't see any, so we decided to stop for lunch there and wait to see if the fish might get more active.

For lunch today we enjoyed a fresh salad and some bean soup, all delicious. As we wrapped up lunch it started to rain again. The fish still weren't rising, no doubt due to the wind and rain, so we continued floating. Soon the sun was out again, and for the rest of the afternoon we would have constantly changing weather from rain to sun and wind and back again.



The action slowed after lunch, likely in response to the shifting weather. We were both moving a fish here and there, but they weren't super aggressive takes and few fish were finding their way to the net. I changed up to a big tan Home Invader streamer to try something big.

The Home Invader proved to be the ticket. In the first run we came to I hooked a nice

brown about 18 inches. In the next run a big brown came up out of a submerged log and hammered the streamer. After a good fight, we were releasing a very fat brown trout about 22 inches, but so fat I would guess it must have weighed 4 pounds or more.

I continued to hook nice fish on the big streamer, so we switched Bruce up to a Home Invader as well, and in the next run we were doubled up on 16 inch rainbows. The next half hour showed more good fishing, then all went quiet and we couldn't buy a fish. But the day was growing late now, and soon we were at the confluence with the Manihuales River, at the point where the two rivers converge to form the larger Rio Aysen.

We drove back to the lodge and cleaned up. Appetizers of empanadas was laid out, and we learned that the other guests, Andrew fishing with Chino walking and wading on some of the upper sections of the Rio Simpson and Mike fishing with Sebastian on the upper Simpson float, all had good days with lots of action, also mostly with streamers although Andrew got into some decent dry dropper fishing on the smaller creek as well.

Dinner was lamb with potatoes and salad, followed by a delicious fruity dessert. The guests all went to bed, and I stayed up again talking with Nico, Pablo, Coca, and Armando, telling stories about family, and places. They are wonderful people and a big part of what makes this place special.

Trouters and La Reserva Lodge is a special place. It features a strong fishing program built on the backs of a handful of highly professional, experienced, local Chilean guides, and punctuated with the amazing diversity of options they have based out of the perfectly situated lodge just outside of Coyhaique. The lodge is beautiful, and all of the little, personal touches from the family make it incredibly endearing to anyone who visits here.

Saturday, January 21, 2017

I packed up after breakfast, then relaxed till Nico and Ilesie arrived at 10:30 to take Bruce and me into town to meet Joe Gorrone in Coyhaique. The sun was out, there was a mild breeze, and not a cloud in the sky. It would have been a great day to be on the water! We said our goodbyes to Pablo, Armando, Coca, and Nico, then loaded our luggage and ourselves into Ilesie's truck for the short, 5 minute drive into Coyhaique. When we pulled up in front of the Hotel Nomades, Jose was right behind us.

Jose had to run some errands, so we walked into town to get a bite to eat. It was a lovely stroll through the town, and only about 6 blocks from the hotel to the main square, then to Mama Gaucha for another great meal of Italian style pizza and locally brewed cervesas.

We walked back to the hotel and settled into the lobby of the hotel to wait. At about 4:15 a young American walked in the door and introduced himself as Hamilton, and said it was time to go. Jose was driving a big Toyota Tundra with a lot of room. We took off back up the road north, past the turnoff to La Reserva, then after about 15 minutes on the Carretera Austral we

turned right onto a gravel road towards Nireguao. The drive was very interesting. We were rising in elevation, and quickly emerged from the forested canyons of the Rio Simpson Valley to a much broader plateau, back to the sweeping grasslands and a topography similar to what I'd seen in Las Pampas a couple of weeks before. No longer were their countless varieties of tall green trees; back were the wind-swept, scraggly *nire* trees. With the warm day the wildflowers were out, creating spectacular landscapes with brilliant purple and pink flowers bursting through fields of grass, with brown rocky mountains in the background.

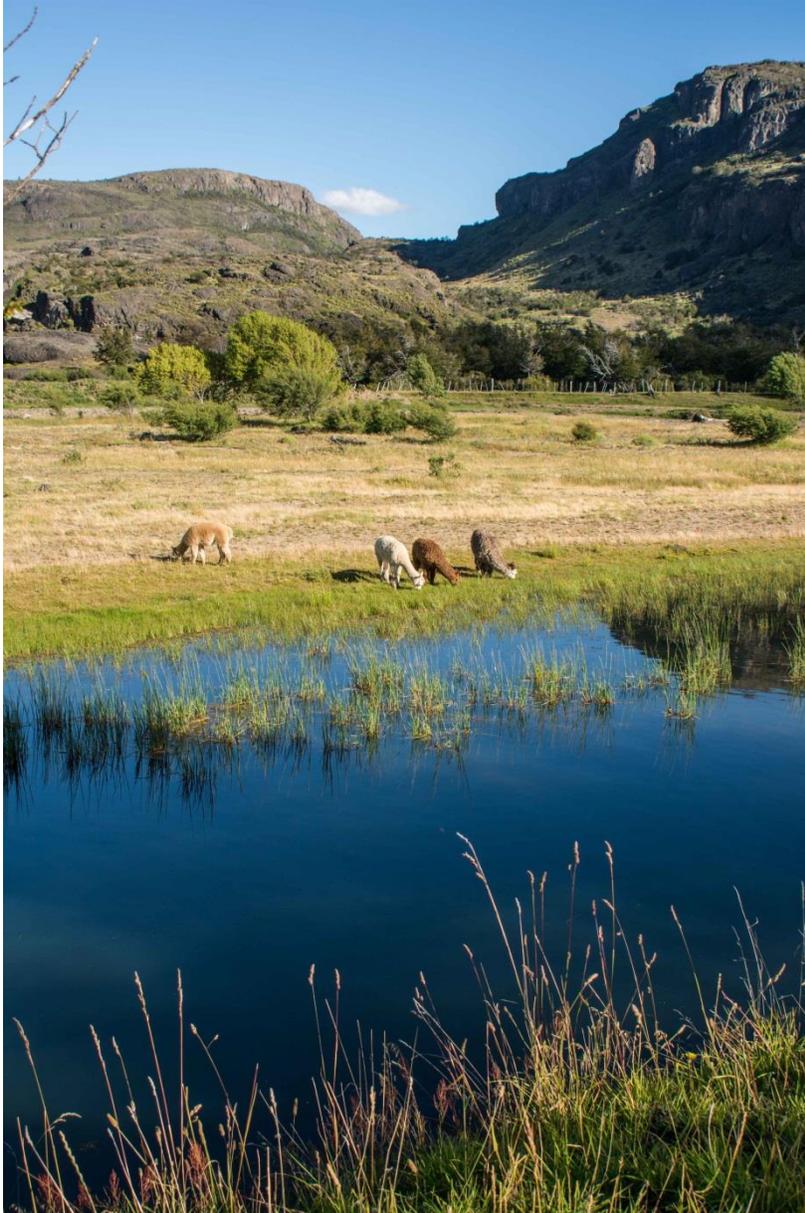
We crested one rise and you could look out on the entire Nireguao valley, to the hills of Argentina in the background. Jose pointed out his farm at the foothills at the far north end of the valley. *Nireguao* translates to place of the *nire*, since the valley and headwaters of the river are populated with so many of these trees.

The road crossed the upper Nireguao river, a small trickle of a meandering meadow stream here, then a series of small tributaries that would make it a nice, medium sized river where it flows through the farm. We pulled up to the lodge gate at about 5:45, and hour and a half after we'd left Coyhaique.

The first building to the right was Jose's house, adjacent to the guides' quarters. A bit further down the road we pulled up to the main lodge building. The 6 guest rooms are laid out in 3 cabins, each cabin with a central sitting area and two rooms on either side. Each bedroom features two beds (twins in most rooms, queen in a couple of the cabins), a sitting chair, closet, desk, and en suite bathroom. The views look right out onto the lagoon ponds where we could already see big trout cruising the shallows and slurping grasshoppers. The Nireguao could be seen in the background curving through the farm, with a half dozen Alpaca's munching grass along the bank.

The main lodge has a wonderful character to it, a sense of old world Chile. The walls – like in the cabins – are made of river rock set in concrete, punctuated by full timbers for the rafters and wooden ceilings. The lodge is decorated





with historic black and white photos of the indigenous peoples, along with art from the region, antlers from red stag, and some beautiful seashells that Jose has collected on his many travels sailing around the globe during the off season.

Bruce, Jose, and I were all sitting in the lodge telling stories when we heard the truck arrive with the other guests. Neal and Paul from Fresno and Hans from Sweden all walked in and we said hello, welcoming them to El Saltamontes. They had arrived in Santiago a day early, so they were relatively well rested and ready to go. They jumped right in with the empanadas and Pisco Sours. About the time dinner was ready they ran to quickly check in to their rooms, returning just as the plates were being served.

Dinner was amazing. The first course was fresh peeled crab and a crab frittata, followed by

a main course of fresh baked fish in a cream sauce with shrimp. Dessert was something to do with Mango, all of it delicious.

Brett, who had driven the other guests in from Balmaceda, is the head guide and he joined us for dinner. He's been here for 5 or 6 seasons now, and explained the daily schedule and the many options for fishing between the upper beats on the Nireguao, the lower beats near the lodge, the tributaries, even a couple of higher altitude lakes. My favorite line was when he said, "you never have to fish a beat twice unless you want to, and you will never fish a beat that's been fished the day before." It's almost all wading, with the exception of the lakes and a float they can do on the upper Manihuales where they keep a boat stashed on a private access.

After dinner everyone retired to their rooms for a good night's sleep.

Sunday, January 22, 2017

A fresh pot of coffee was delivered to each cabin in the morning. Breakfast was served at 8:30. Brett gave the guide and fishing assignments for the day. We all rigged up our rods and put waders on, then headed out for the day. Diego and I departed in one of the 4x4 diesel vans they use to take anglers around the farm, with his 1 year old puppy, Flor, tagging along.

We started off at the “airport”, where they supposedly have a gravel runway. Near this so-called airport is a series of lagunas, ponds that fill with water during the flood season and trickle out throughout the rest of the year. The lagunas are small, less than 1 acre in size or smaller and usually long and narrow, easily cast all the way across. They are connected by small channels, a meter across in most places, and looking much like a small, meadow spring creek.



We started off with a Chernobyl ant, fishing a small creek that fed out of the first laguna. I would make a cast into the meter-wide channel, let it sit for a second, then walk up a few feet to try again, in this manner effectively fishing every few feet of the channel. We spooked a couple of trout, then the channel opened up into the first laguna.

Instantly in the laguna we spotted two big trout cruising in the shallows. Diego said to cast just behind the closest fish. I lay the big terrestrial down just behind its tail, and in an instant the



fish had swirled and charged the fly, only to turn away at the last second. I did the same thing with the other fish, and also got a refusal.

We continued trudging along the edge of the laguna, casting into the slight chop from the breezy morning. Toward the back end of the pond I made a cast, then turned to look at a jackrabbit behind me when I heard the sound of a big fish slurping. I turned around and my fly was gone. I set the hook and was grateful for my distraction as it prevented me from setting the hook too soon. I was tied into a nice brown trout, and soon Diego had an 18 inch brown in the net.

We continued working our way down through the series of channels and lagoons. I landed one fish for every 4 I spooked. At one point I gave the rod to Diego to fish so that I could take some photos, as it is a beautiful area with the small channel, clear water, and big mountains in the background. Soon we came to a larger lake, and Diego left me to fish so he could go back and move the van. I missed one big rainbow, well over 20 inches, then spooked another, and landed a 15 inch rainbow just as Diego caught up with me.



From there we drove a short way down the narrow two track, with Flor chasing alongside of us, until we reached a windy section of the

Nireguao, around the border between beats 2 and 3. We got out there. Diego said there was another laguna on the other side of the river that we should check out, so we waded across a shallow flat and trekked about 50 yards through a field of purple lupines to another small laguna. I instantly spooked a fish in the close side, but worked my way down and landed a 14 inch rainbow in the back end of the tiny laguna.

From there we returned to the river and started fishing. I switched over from the Chernobyl to a black Fat Albert since we'd had a handful of refusals, and hooked a small brown trout on the first cast. From thereon on out it was pretty much one fish after another, not on every cast but at least every third cast. The fish were a mixture of browns and rainbows from 8 to 14 inches. We fished our way upstream through two bends, then returned to the van to drive to a new spot closer to the lunch spot.

We parked at another bend in the river and got out of the van. The Nireguao here is a quintessential meadow stream, meandering through a series of riffles, logjams, backeddies, and overhanging banks. It is perhaps the easiest wading river I have ever seen, with rarely a rock bigger than a baseball and mostly fine, smooth gravel. And there appear to be fish just about everywhere.



We fished our way upstream, and I was hooking a lot of fish. Some were small, but 1 in 4 was 14 inches or better, and 1 in 10 was 16 inches or better, so it was a lot of fun. Soon the Black Fat Albert was too beat up and fish stopped reacting to it, so I switched back to a Chernobyl Ant and they went crazy for that. I fished one area where I could see several fish rising in a small pocket on the far side in between a pair of dead branches sticking up from the water. I made a cast across the current and landed the Chernobyl in the pocket. A second after the fly hit the water it disappeared into a swirl. I counted to two, then set the hook and felt a heavy weight on the other end, a nice fish! I battled the fish around the many submerged logs and stumps in the river, and soon was releasing a beautiful 18 inch rainbow.

I waded back out and saw another fish rising in the same pocket. I stripped off some line, made another cast, and wham another fish took the fly. I landed this one, too, about 15 inches. I looked up, and still fish were rising. A third cast...and a third fish, this one again about 15 inches. I thought for sure that had to be it, as it was a very small pocket, but as I watched another fish, this one bigger than the 3 I had just landed, nosed up and ate a small dry fly, showing his whole dorsal and tail. A really big fish. I made another cast into the little pocket,

but this time a gust of wind blew my fly right into one of the dead branches at the top of the pocket of water. I tried for a full minute to get the fly loose, but it was stuck good. Oh, well, I said, and broke the fly off. When I pulled on the line and the tippet broke, however, the fly somehow came loose from the stick and plopped into the pool. A second later the big fish came up and slurped the fly down! I laughed and watched, and watched, and watched...and a full two minutes later, I saw the fly pop back up, finally spat out of the fish's mouth.

About that time Diego returned and said it was time for lunch. He had built a small fire and was grilling some chicken over the open flames. While the pollo cooked, we enjoyed a cup of hot soup, followed by the chicken with some tasty rice.

After lunch we started fishing again. I switched to a larger foam hopper pattern called a Pool Toy. For the rest of the afternoon it was one fish after another, ranging from 10 inches to one beautiful rainbow that was right around 20 inches. It was good fishing, with consistent action, and fun to be getting all of the action on the surface. Eventually we saw the other van returning to the lodge, and although we fished for a while longer yet it was getting late and cool with clouds moving in and the wind picking up. We decided to head back to the lodge.

It was 8:00 by the time we pulled in, just in time to join the others for dinner and hear fishing stories before retiring for the evening.

Monday, January 23, 2017

Fresh coffee was delivered at 7:30 again this morning, and by 8:30 were enjoying a breakfast of crepes, dulce de leche, and fresh fruit. We reconvened in front of the lodge at 10:00 to load up into the vehicles with the guides and go fishing for the day. Brett, Jose, and I would be taking a tour of the region. Our goal was to see as much as possible of the countless options available for guests at El Saltamontes.

We started off driving off the ranch, heading back up the road we came in on. About 20 minutes from the ranch we pulled up to the side of the road at a beat that Brett referred to as 70B. We climbed over a fence, and walked about 10 minutes across the pampas to the river. We climbed another fence here, then walked a short distance to a small laguna off the main river. Jose started fishing the first tiny pocket with a small hopper, no fish. We continued upstream to the next pocket, my turn for a couple of casts but again no action. Each pocket is maybe a couple of feet wide by a few feet long, really tiny, but can have some really big fish hanging out in them.

In the next laguna opening Jose plopped his hopper down in the middle of the pool and there was a massive swirl below it...but a refusal. Brett changed up the fly and Jose tried again. We could see the fish moving in the grasses because wherever the fish was the grasses would move...but he wouldn't come out to play again.



In the next little pool I took a shot. We spotted a nice brown trout, probably about 16 inches, holding in the shallow water. I cast behind it, in front of it, and to both sides...it was asleep. Finally I whacked the fly right on its head to wake it up and it disappeared into the weeds.

From here we walked back over to the main river channel, fishing a couple of runs on the Niregauo. I hooked a couple of brown trout on the hopper, then crossed with Brett and he showed me a small tributary stream that he liked to hike up with guests. We walked up it a couple of bends, the creek never more than 3 or 4 feet across. The first spot we came too with water deeper than a few inches, the creek pushed into a small hole about a foot wide and two feet long, pushing into an undercut bank. I cast my hopper right into the middle of the tiny hole, and a small 6-inch trout ate it right away. A second later a much larger fish tried to eat that fish...but was

unsuccessful. Although it proved the point that big fish frequently live in tiny places in this part of Patagonia.

Our goal was to see as much as possible today, and we'd already moved fish in three different types of water here, so we hiked back to the car to drive somewhere new.

20 minutes later, we had crossed the Norte river which was the biggest contributor of water to the Niregauo, and had entered the headwaters of the river in the Valley of the Moon. We had entered a different micro climate here, a high desert scenario with very few trees. You could have been in Nevada or Wyoming, except that instead of sagebrush there was pampas grass and thorny Calafate bushes. The creek here was tiny, a classic meadow stream meandering through countless oxbows and undercut banks. Every shallow spot we walked past showed a bunch of small fish skirting away, and every hole of more than a few inches held a larger fish. The first spot I cast my fly against the grass and was rewarded with a 16 inch brown. The

second spot I cast to yielded a larger brown, I would guess at around 19 inches before it jumped and spit the hook. We walked downstream about 15 minutes and fished a few more bends in the river, hooking a few more small fish. Then we decided we'd "experienced" this fishery and hiked back to the truck to continue our excursion.

We drove back out of the Valley of the Moon, then turned towards the mountains and started to gain in elevation, soon reentering another micro climate more similar to the rainforests I'd seen near Patagonian Basecamp with a lot of trees and biodiversity. A bit further down the gravel road we came to a lake called La Junca (translated to "the reed" for the many reeds along its shores). La Junca is famous in Patagonia for big trout, arguably the home to the most big trout anywhere in the region. It was so windy today there were whitecaps on the lake, not the sort of conditions people normally would go there but Brett wanted to make sure I at least saw it.

We had a quick lunch in the small lee of a little hill, but still the salad blew off our plates so we mostly enjoyed the lentil beans and tomatoes. When we'd finished, Brett said let's go fishing. I though he was crazy it was so windy, but figured what the hell we're here, let's try it. Jose opted to stay in the truck where it was warm and not windy, and I admittedly was a bit jealous.

We walked the shoreline, and I made casts with a big Fat Albert along the shoreline. Casting, making the fly twitch a few times, then taking a step downwind along the bank and repeating. Almost like steelhead fishing. I didn't think it would work and admittedly was fishing without much confidence. It was crazy windy. But then, lo and behold, a large brown trout came up a foot off the shore and slurped in my big terrestrial fly. I waited a second, then set the hook and soon we had a 22 inch, fat brown trout in the net.

We released the fish and continued along the bank, although now I was fishing with considerably more confidence. Not too much further I had an even bigger fish swirl under the big dry, but it didn't eat. It was only a few feet away, and likely saw us when it came up to look at the fly. We continued for a while without luck, then for a moment the sun broke through the clouds and Brett spotted a big fish cruising the shoreline, heading right for me. He called out directions from a high bank where he could see into the water, and I made a perfect cast...right on top of the fish's head. He didn't like that, and a second later he was swimming fast two feet past my toes on his way to safer water.

We hiked back to the car, then continued our driving tour of the region. We took a back road from La Junca to cut over to Rio Norte and Lago Norte, which took us back up and over into an even wetter range, and a big rainstorm. This was a new road that used to be little more than a wagon track, but now it was a nice gravel road curving up over a ridge and dropping down into the next valley over.

From here we could see down into the Rio Norte, a freestone stream that was beautiful and one of Brett's favorite local fisheries. We paralleled the creek for a while until we came, after passing through several gates, to the large Lago Norte. Lago Norte is a big lake, and Jose has a

small cabin there called the “Glass House”, because it’s made almost entirely of glass with 360 degree views of the lake below and mountains all around. They keep a small Jetboat parked in the lake throughout the season, so they can access the lake. They’ll take lunch in the glass house when they do so. It’s a beautiful spot, even in the rain, and I know from the fishing stories from the guys the day before that it is home to some really nice fish that like to eat dry flies.

Coming into the lake we could also see the spring creek they call Rio Blanco. Brett said it had been too cold this season for it to turn on yet, but it was another one of his favorite fisheries, a slow moving, deep, spring creek with countless pools and runs and a lot of big fish.

Rio Norte flows out of the lake, and we followed it downstream on our way back to the lodge. We stopped at one spot to look at it, and it was an idyllic mountain freestone stream with riffles, pockets, and pools. As Brett said, “I’ve never taken anyone here that didn’t want to come back.” I could see why.

Soon we came across another big lake, but it is apparently always windy there so though it is known to have some big fish they never fish it. El Gato creek flows out of it though, and continued down – along with the road we were on – back to the ranch entrance. Guests fishing on the ranch in beat 5 often hike up El Gato.

It was pouring down rain when we returned to the lodge. I hustled into my cabin to clean up, because it was almost 8 o’clock, but some of the guests still hadn’t returned from fishing. It may be a late start in the morning, but they more than make up for it fishing well into the afternoon and evening.

Soon we were all gathered back at the lodge drinking Pisco Sours and sharing stories from the day’s adventures.

Tuesday, January 24, 2017

The weather today was unlike any I’d seen during my 3 weeks so far in Patagonia. There was not a cloud in the sky. Blue as far as you can see. Some wind, but not bad compared to many of the other days. I think this is a more typical day, unlike the weather I’d seen so far. It’s good to end the trip on a “typical”, nice weather day.

At 10:00 Mauro pulled up in one of the 4x4 vans. We piled our gear in, and drove downstream on the two-track ranch road for about 10 minutes. Mauro stopped the van just shy of a wooden cattle guard, and we got out to peer down into a lagoon off the main river. We spotted one fish cruising, but decided to continue on and try the river a bit further downstream.

We drove another 5 minutes, then started fishing at a spot where the road runs right between the river to the left off a cut bank and a small laguna to the right. They call it Diego's laguna, because he's gotten two trucks stuck there over the last two seasons!

We started off on the laguna, Bruce and Mauro walking the left side and me wading through the reeds on the left. We covered both sides of the lake well, but without turning any fish, so we turned our efforts to the river.



We leapfrogged our way upriver, although the fishing was slow. Though the weather was clear, it was still cold from the storm yesterday, and you could just tell the fish were still lethargic. Every once in a while I would move a fish to the big terrestrial dry fly, but they weren't taking it aggressively like they had the day before. Gradually, however, as the sun shone down on the river, we started to see a bit more movement.

I found a spot on the opposite side of the river where I could see 3 or 4 nice fish suspended in the current. I put a cast right behind the biggest of the fish. Here they often want you to cast behind the fish. When the fly lands in front the fish often spooks unless it's three feet or more away, but when it lands on their tail they spin around and gobble it up. This fish instantly turned and charged the fly, only to refuse it. He swirled at it two more times, but refused to eat. I cast at one of the smaller fish further down, and it swam right up and ate the fly, a rainbow about 12 inches. There were still several fish working the pool, and I hooked and landed another 12 inch rainbow. Between two submerged logs, at an awkward angle with the bushes behind me, I could see another big trout holding just below the surface. I managed to get a cast to land the fly about two feet behind him. It was enough to get his attention, as he turned, charged the fly, and ate it. I tried to wait the appropriate two seconds to set the hook...but apparently didn't wait long enough as the fly came sailing free with no fish attached.

That put the rest of the fish down, so I hiked back upstream to join Mauro and Bruce. Bruce was landing a little brown on the dropper nymph. I walked about 1 hundred yards upstream and started fishing the next riffle, and instantly hooked up with three more trout on the Black Fat Albert. They were starting to get active now!

We decided to stop for lunch, wading back across the river, climbing into the van, and driving about 1 minute to a shady area with a picnic table. Lunch was a soup with some potatoes, squash, and beef.

After lunch, Bruce wanted to go fish the airport lagunas, so I decided to start fishing the river there at the lunch spot and work my way upstream to catch up with the others later in the afternoon. As soon as I made my first cast, it was obvious the tides had turned and the fish were ready to feed in the beautiful, blue-bird afternoon weather. I fished fast as I worked upstream, and on average every third cast moved a fish. It was incredible, fish after fish after fish, attacking the big dry fly like they hadn't eaten in weeks. It was everything you could ever hope for in a small stream, dry fly fishing scenario. Most of the fish were small, from 8-14 inches, but they were plentiful and hammering big dry flies on the surface. Most of the fish were rainbows, but every fourth or fifth fish would be a buttery colored brown trout. 15 minutes into my post-lunch fishing, I'd already lost count of how many fish I'd landed. Who could ask for more!



In one spot I hiked up a high bank that looked down on a deep pool that pushed up against a rock wall on the far side and an overhanging willow on the near side. Two feet off the wall and suspended just below the surface was a big rainbow trout, well over twenty inches. I sat and watched it for a minute, as it dodged a few inches towards me and slurped a small insect off the surface. This was a big, happy, hungry fish. I stripped off some line, knowing I probably only had one shot at this fish before putting him down. I made a few false casts, then landed the fly about 4 feet upstream. The fish saw it immediately and charged the fly, swirling on it but refusing it at the last second. Dejected, I let out a hearty sigh while the fly continued drifting down the current. Then suddenly the fish reappeared beneath the fly and sucked it in. I was

startled by the sudden appearance, and promptly set the hook without waiting the appropriate two seconds, instantly removing the fly from the fish's mouth. If I hadn't screwed it up, that would have been the fish of the day, if not the trip! Still, fun to spot it, cast to it, and watch it eat. That just doesn't happen very often, at least not for me.

I continued fishing – and catching – my way upstream until I caught up with the van. I fished a riffle within sight of the van for a few minutes, caught a few more fish, then saw Mauro and Bruce appear so I walked across the open field and joined them. They'd had a great afternoon as well in the airport lagunas and creek, hooking many big fish and landing a few of them. Bruce was ready to head in, and I was too. It was a great way to end the trip, a taste of how incredible the fishing can really be here when the weather actually cooperates.



Dinner was another work of art from the chef. I learned from Jose after dinner that we would have to leave the ranch at 7 am in the morning to head back to Coyhaique. I said my farewells to the guests and guides, then returned to my room to pack up so I'd be ready to go first thing in the morning.

Wednesday, January 25, 2017

My alarm roused me from a deep sleep at 6:15 am, just as the sun broke over the mountains to the east. I showered, finished packing, and was waiting in front of the lodge a few minutes

before 7. Jose pulled up in the Tundra, and we filled some extra water bottles to take along on the ride in case it overheated since it still had a leak in the radiator. He was going to take it to the mechanic today while it was in town. Which also meant he'd have to arrange an airport transfer for me instead of taking me to the airport.

The drive took an hour and a half. I was still in a daze as we pulled up to the Hotel Nomades in Coyhaique. Jose dropped off my stuff and said he'd meet me at Mama Gauchas at 12:00, otherwise I was on my own to kill a bunch of time hanging out in the lobby of the hotel. I found a couch upstairs and parked for a few hours.

At 11 I walked downstairs to take a stroll, and the front desk girl told me the transfer van was coming to the hotel at 12:30 to pick me up, that it cost 5,000 Pesos. They wouldn't take dollars, and she wouldn't exchange money for me. So I took off on a mission, walking back down to the main plaza and associated walking area. I had the route down now, and it was a beautiful, sunny, warm day for a stroll. 15 minutes on foot, and I was back in the town square.

Across the street from Mama Gaucha's I found a money exchange and swapped out a few dollars for Chilean Pesos. I checked out the tourist shops one last time but didn't see much worth buying. I took a few sidestreets to enjoy my last few minutes of fresh, open air, making it back to Hotel Nomades at noon. 30 minutes later the mini bus pulled up. There were two other locals on board, and after 4 more stops around town the bus was packed with locals. I was the only gringo, and shared my seat with a mom and her young daughter.

Tired from a long trip and an early morning, I conked out and woke up 40 minutes later as we pulled up to the Balmaceda airport. It's a one terminal airport, bigger than Esquel but not by much. Two airlines service here, LAN and Sky. Lan has most of the flights, I was on a Sky flight. Both afternoon flights departed at the same time, so the airport was absolute chaos.

Once my bags were checked and I had my ticket to Santiago, I went upstairs to eat something in the small airport café. Eventually they called the flights and everyone from both flights piled into a long line to go through security and into the departure area. Once through there, everyone milled around in the departure lounge, standing about and forming lines, then changing lines because nobody really knew where they were supposed to be. Finally they boarded the LAN flight, which made a little room in the cramped, sweaty terminal. Then they called our flight, and before long I was on the plane, taking off into the sunny southern Chile afternoon.

I fell asleep right away, waking up two hours later, on descent into Santiago. I deplaned, found the baggage terminal, collected both of my bags, and wandered out in the insanity that was the exit to the terminal with dozens of people blocking the exit with signs yelling for taxis. I pushed my way through, knocking at least two guys over (this is the real reason you always grab a cart in the baggage claim, even if you don't need it). Finally, I found another line (I'm beginning to think the Chileans like standing in line) to ride the elevator up to the second floor. I opted to ditch the cart and lug my bags up the stairs.

At this point I was drenched in sweat, a great way to start a 36 hour travel day. It was more chaos in the international check in terminal, people everywhere standing in line, trying to figure out how to check in on the computer kiosks, standing in line some more, finding another area of kiosks with shorter lines, finally checking in on the computer, then standing in line to check my bags, eventually bags are checked and I get to stand in line again to clear security, and 2 hours after I'd landed I was finally back inside an airport and waiting for the next flight.

The United flight from Santiago to Houston was smooth and eventually we were touching down in Houston. Immigration, Customs, Security again, and since our flight had landed early I was actually sitting down to eat breakfast at the time I was supposed to land. After breakfast I still had a couple of hours to kill before the flight boarded, departing at 9 am towards San Francisco.

A few hours later the California sun was shining through the thick glass windows of San Francisco airport. I grabbed a burger at Gordon Biersch, then waited a couple more hours for my final flight of the day, the one hour jump from SFO to Redding. 36 hours later, with a 2.5 hour ride on a dirt road in a truck with a broken radiator, an hour in a van packed with Chileans, 2 hours on an airplane full of locals, a lot of standing in lines and walking around airports, a 10 hour flight across the Americas, more airports, a 4 hour flight across the western US, and finally a small plane for the final hour home.