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**Mike Mercer's New Zealand Trip
Riverview Lodge and Owen River Lodge – South Island (March 1 - 12, 2019)**



March 1 – The flights between the States and New Zealand are largely overnights, so on March 1st I drove down to Sacramento to catch a late afternoon flight to San Francisco (they issued all my connecting boarding passes through to Christchurch here), where I had a couple hours of layover before catching my Air New Zealand flight to Auckland, on the North Island. Most international travel to New Zealand begins with a stop in Auckland – their largest city by far (though Wellington is actually the capital city). As 12 hour non-stop flights go, this one is not too bad, thanks to Air New Zealand's comfortable seats and extendable leg rests, standard on coach seats. Their crews are friendlier than those one often finds on overnight US airline flights, and their food is a little bit better. I don't sleep well on planes, so watched 5 consecutive movies on the flight, interspersed by meals, and a bit of reading. Landing the next morning in Auckland it was actually March 3rd, not the 2nd, due to a crossing of the Dateline. I got off the plane and followed the obvious signs to Customs, where they asked for the Declaration Form and passport; normally you are given the Declarations Form on the airplane to fill out but they were out, so I filled one out at the counters provided just before getting into the Customs line. Passing through Customs, you are directed to another line to pick up your checked luggage (if you declare that you are bringing in used waders and/or wading boots, they will insist that

you take them out of your luggage and they will treat them with an anti-bacterial solution, which will add about 20 minutes to the process...I used loaner waders at both lodges, so didn't need to do this).

After collecting your checked luggage you need to transfer from the International to the Domestic Terminal. They are very near to each other, and there are two options to accomplish this. First, walk out the front doors of the International Airport onto the sidewalk – here you will see signs directing you where to wait if you want to catch a free bus shuttle to the Domestic. These shuttles pick up and drop off every 15 minutes. Or you can walk – expect about a 15 minute stroll. Once out the front door of the International there is a sign directing you to follow a wide green line painted on the ground – it takes a bunch of twists and turns over the several hundred yard walk to the domestic. I did the walk as all of my flights had been delayed, and my connection was uncomfortably tight. Entering the Domestic you turn left and walk to the Air New Zealand counters, where you re-check your luggage and then check the monitor to see which gate your flight departs from. Because I got there inside of 30 minutes before my connecting flight, they could no longer take my checked luggage at the counter, and directed me a little further down the hall to where they have an express Baggage Drop...super easy, and helpful people got me squared away. En route to your gate you go through their version of a TSA security checkpoint, though it is a bit more relaxed, then on to the gate to board. I walked right on, but fortunately was not the last person, so did not get the angry glares... A quick 90-minute flight brought me to the airport in Christchurch – surprisingly small for a city of 400,000 – where I collected my luggage and met Robin Gemmell, co-owner and hostess at Riverview Lodge.



Robin is a super-sweet lady, very capable and hospitable. Because I had never been in Christchurch, we spent a couple of hours seeing the town, and then had a lovely lunch at a beachside restaurant – fish and chips! This is the town that was most severely damaged in the huge earthquake a number of years ago, so you could see a

lot of rebuilding going on. For a large city, Christchurch has a very small town feel, just the same as almost every town in New Zealand outside of Auckland (which is not a particularly great place to stay, in my opinion – I always suggest people stay anywhere but here during their time in-country. New Zealand is a beautiful country filled with wonderful landscapes and charming towns and villages, with Auckland being the unfortunate exception).

It is about a two-hour drive from Christchurch to the lodge, which is located just outside the beautiful little village of Hanmer Springs, a mecca for tourists wanting to experience all the wonderful outdoor adventures New Zealand has to offer – hot springs, bungee jumping, jet boating whitewater, mountain biking, trekking, etc. Riverview Lodge is situated on a plateau overlooking the beautiful Hanmer Springs valley, the Waiau River, and Spencer Mountain Range; it faces north so gets all day sunshine and beautiful sunsets. It is a small operation, preferring to hold occupancy at 6 anglers, though they can comfortably accommodate 8, if need be. There are three impeccably decorated double occupancy guest rooms in the main lodge, and a stand-alone guest cottage about a 30-yard walk away. I stayed in the cottage, and loved it – quite spacious, with large living/dining room, bedroom, and bathroom, and fully furnished kitchen - great for anyone, but a particularly good match for a couple. Beds are normally either queens and/or king singles, very good quality. There are carpeted floors, standing heaters, large fans, wide screen televisions, windows and glass doors everywhere, walk-in showers, and plenty of closet space. I forgot to bring an electrical adaptor, but the lodge supplies them to anyone who needs them – they are a three-pronged affair. The cottage also has a large spa tub for those who would like it in preference to a shower – a nice option. The main lodge has a comfortable gathering room with couches and chairs, where guests enjoy hors d' oeuvres and drinks prior to dinner; dining areas both inside and outside (most meals taken outside under a picturesque vine-laced trellis); and a library complete with a huge pool table, mounted trophy heads (owner John Gemmell is both a fishing and hunting guide) and couches/chairs and walls of sporting books. There are extensive grounds outside the lodge, beautiful and well-manicured. The one day I was too sick - flu bug no doubt caught in an airport somewhere - to fish I lounged around in the sun on the porch outside my cottage, breathing the country air and admiring the extensive landscaping. Typical for New Zealand, this lodge is a beautiful facility that a non-angler will also enjoy, and Robin will take care of them in nearby Hanmer Springs.





On arriving to the lodge I met John Gemmell, and was pleasantly surprised to find he was guiding two of our long-time clients. They were there with their wives, and everyone seemed to be having a good time. They had been there for a few days, and on this night (their last of their trip) one of the anglers showed me a picture of a gorgeous 7.5-pound brown he had just caught. They both described having plenty of opportunities during the stay, but with an extreme drought in place, as well as howling winds each day, the fish were not coming easy. The streams were half their normal size, so fish were definitely touchy. Anglers will typically experience easier fishing in the December-February time span. November can also be amazing, but there is a greater chance of rain blowing the rivers out. March is a great month and typically has the best and most predictable weather of their season – the fish have just seen more flies by that point. Owner John Gemmell still guides every week, though he is starting to pass the baton more often to his younger guides. I fished with Nic Robertson...he is their head guide, and is amazing at his job. He was unfailingly

enthusiastic, serious, and works very hard to get his clients into large browns. And there is no question but that Riverview is near to, arguably, the best rivers for really large browns – each of the three days I fished there, on different rivers, I saw fish in the 8-12 pound range, which are really large for New Zealand rivers. This has to be considered a major draw for some anglers, as normally one has to pay big money to helicopter into a couple of known big fish rivers to realistically target double-digit fish. Though I didn't manage to land any double-digit fish, I had opportunities, and had two eat my flies. On one the nymph just slipped out of the fish's mouth – bad luck – and the other fish ate a dry fly and I struck too quickly (rookie move). Interestingly, the *average* fish here are no larger than anywhere else – they just have more of the really large fish, for some reason. My largest landed fish here was a couple ounces under 8 pounds (guides everywhere in New Zealand use nets with built in scales and report size in pounds, not inches), and fish averaged 3-5 pounds. Riverview guides have private access to a few streams found on large, remote “stations” – New Zealand-ese for ranches; though they take longer to four-wheel drive into, the benefit is fish that see little to no outside pressure. It's like helicoptering into lightly-touched backcountry streams, without having to pay a couple thousand bucks a day for the helis.

The lodges down there all recommend 6 weight rods, with good reason – you need to be able to comfortably cast long (15-foot) leaders with small indicators and smaller weighted nymphs (or large cicada dries) quite accurately, to very discerning fish. Casts aren't at all long – 20-40 feet, on average – but if there is a wind the 6 weight give you more control. If you have perfect, windless weather conditions, a 5 weight would be okay. The lodges are happy to provide rod/reel outfits, if needed, and request anglers use earth-toned fly lines to avoid spooking the fish while casting. All one needs is a floating line, and the guides will provide all the flies. One quickly learns to make the first cast count here, when the fish is happy and actively feeding in the current...each subsequent cast diminishes the chance for success, as these browns will quickly sense something is wrong, even if you're making good casts. On a normal day anglers will get 6-12 opportunities at stalked, visible fish – on a good day 3-4 fish will be hooked and landed (and each fish is memorable – the fails as well as the successes - as each is stalked carefully and watched as the fly is presented...challenging, and very satisfying when the fish eats). Riverview Lodge prefers guests bring their own waders, and the lodge will provide the wading boots. I used their rubber-soled waders and was amazed that because of the loose-rock nature of their streams and almost complete lack of slime, the rubber soles were perfect...at no time did I ever slip or feel uncomfortable with them at Riverview. And the guides here hate metal studs on shoes and metal tipped wading staffs, as they broadcast sound far too much and spook fish from a distance before they can even be fished to. We had warm weather when I was there, so I wet waded almost exclusively – it was far more comfortable than wearing waders when you consider the miles hiked daily, and that the water is not ice cold. Most guides wear shorts, heavy wool socks, neoprene gaiters, and wading boots – many guests (like me)



substitute quick-dry wading pants for the shorts – there is a hole in the ozone there, and it is easy to burn one's legs (and all other unprotected skin), if you don't apply sunscreen consistently. On colder, rainy days, though, waders are a necessity. Mosquitos are rarely a problem here, but on still, overcast days the sand flies

can be a real nuisance (like white sox/no see-ums in Alaska)...fortunately, any DEET product and even some of the natural repellents work very well to keep them off.

Meals were always a treat. Riverview hired a young Canadian chef who clearly loved his job, and was very good at it. Breakfasts were served around 7:30am and were brown sugar-glazed bacon, sausages, eggs, potatoes/hash, cereal, toast, fruit, yogurt, juice and toast affairs, and cooked to order. Lunches were excellent sandwiches/fruit/desserts taken on the water...potato chips don't seem to be a normal thing down there, so I suggested many Americans would appreciate those in their lunch. Dinners were a real treat, delicious and presented beautifully. My favorite here was a local venison (red stag) dish with garlic mashes potatoes and carrots, with a fresh from the garden salad topped with a blueberry extract dressing. Dessert that night was crème brulee, and it was *perfect*. Another night was berry crumble with ice cream – memorable.

What makes Riverview Lodge so unique and special?

- One thing that truly sets Riverview Lodge apart from other NZ lodges is the near daily availability of very large brown trout in streams accessible via driving from the lodge (not via expensive helicopter access). I saw fish in the 10-pound range literally every day I fished with them, which is exceptionally rare in New Zealand. If you are a trophy fish guy, this may be the place for you.
- With only six guests a week, and being owner/operated, Riverview Lodge maintains a very flexible fishing schedule, and is able to cater to specific guest desires on a daily basis. If you prefer small streams, rivers with more large browns, whatever – they will do all in their power to cater to your desires! As well, they have near private access to some huge ranches that allow them to drive to streams that everyone else would have to helicopter into; this can save anglers \$1000/day in helicopter costs!
- Riverview Lodge guests get to sight-fish to large brown trout in a variety of size streams, each with its own character and personality. Many days you will have repeated chances to hook some of the biggest resident browns of your life.
- Riverview Lodge is fine taking guests for less than a full week trip. So if you want to tag a few days fishing to the end of a business or tourist trip, they are an ideal choice. No need to commit to the cost of a full weeklong trip, if that is not what you're looking for.
- The lodge has free loaner gear – waders and shoes, and rods and reels. For those not wanting to pack their own gear all the way to New Zealand – or not wanting to purchase the specialty-colored fly lines or non-felt-soled wading shoes required - this can be an attractive option.



After three fishing days at Riverview Lodge, I was picked up at the lodge by Felix Borenstein in his Land Rover - he's the owner/operator of Owen River Lodge – and driven the 2.5 hours to his place, northeast of Riverview, near the tiny burg of Murchison. Normally, guests who are only fishing at Owen River Lodge will fly into Nelson from Auckland, where Felix can for a fee have them met and driven the 90 minutes to the lodge. Felix's place is also warm and comfortable, and beautifully appointed. Owen River Lodge takes a maximum of twelve guests, housed in three duplex units (there were only six guests there during my stay, so everyone could have a private room). Each unit has a very large extended and covered porch/deck, where guests can relax with drinks and hors d' oeuvres after a long day of fishing, overlooking the home water, the diminutive Owen River (nothing diminutive about the trout here – there may be more large fish in this creek than most other local waters – they regularly fish over 6-9 pound browns here). The rooms are luxuriously appointed and quite large, with vaulted ceilings, leather chairs, king beds that can be split into two king single for two occupants, tons of huge picture windows, tasteful artwork on all the walls, beautiful floors from local hardwoods, portable controlled heater/air conditioner/ionizer, large bathrooms with large walk-in showers (all natural soap and shampoo products provided), lighted closets with personal safes and mini refrigerator's full of various drinks and snacks, coffee machines, plush robes and slippers, an ironing board and iron, amazing sheets and duvets on the beds...everything here is first class, a reflection of Felix's desire to be the finest fly fishing lodge in New Zealand. The main lodge is spacious and comfortable, with a dining room overlooking the lush grounds and Owen River itself, a bar, a gathering room with overstuffed chairs, and a "fun room" with a wide-screen television, games, and books. Felix's partner – Kylie – helps him run the operation, and she is awesome - a wonderful person, very pleasant and attentive, as well as being the only female certified fly casting instructor in New Zealand. They are always around and available, as are the house staff, and whichever of their two trained chefs are working on any given day. The gardens surrounding the lodge are extensive and beautiful, and have been managed so one can walk through them on small walking trails. They get almost 15 *feet* of rain here a year, so plants grow well. And while this is clearly a serious fly fishing lodge, they are happy to take care of non-angling guests, taking them trekking, jet boating, rafting, or mountain biking, or to the small nearby village of Murchison, or 90 minutes into Nelson where there are golf courses, arts and culture, vineyards, and some Maori experiences.



The fishing program here is superb, based as it is on a staff of remarkable guides who have lived and guided the local rivers for many, many years. Most remarkably, there are 25 rivers within a 90-minute drive of the lodge, and when you figure that most of them have 4-8 beats per river, you get an idea of the immense diversity and sheer amount of river miles available to guests. Importantly, this allows them to rotate waters –

they try and give each beat a 5-day rest between anglers. Because these big browns are pretty wily, this is a huge advantage...if you fished the same water a few times every week, the fish would become almost uncatchable, or even just leave the area. I was walking along one river here, searching for fish with the guide, when he suddenly fell to his belly and instructed me to do the same. He then showed me a big fish that was very slowly cruising up the bank, seeming to look for something. The guide explained to me that something had made the fish nervous, and it was cruising the bank, trying to detect anything out of the ordinary in the silhouette of its home shoreline. We watched it swim by a few yards from our faces and continue on down the bank, and while it didn't bolt or seem to see us, you could tell from its body language that it knew something was wrong; it eventually stopped feeding and sulked on the bottom. These fish are very different – you know you're not in Kansas anymore, after a week on these waters. There is a wonderful variety of waters here, from wide, boulder-strewn rivers to small, flat-watered freestone streams. And they all seem to hold browns that average an honest 4-6 pounds, with larger fish an everyday possibility. My largest fish landed here was also just under 8 pounds. I would say that due to the enormous amount of available water, these fish were a bit easier to catch on average; the relative lack of angling pressure kept them happy. Again, an average day here sees an angler getting 8-12 shots, and a decent angler might hook 4-5 fish...6 or more hooked fish is a great day. Because every fish is spotted and stalked individually, each fish is memorable, and at day's end there are always great stories around the bar about amazing conquests, and epic failures. As with permit, regardless of how good you are, you *will* get your butt handed to you by some of these big browns, but that is part of what makes them so exciting...they are definitely different than trout in other parts of the world. Unlike with permit, you are quite likely to get consistent shots during each day on the water here, and the trout will almost always be large. My toughest day at Owen River Lodge was 4 fish hooked, and best day was 6 fish hooked (with two more that I touched momentarily with the hook), but I found that it was definitely not about this statistic...it was all about walking up on each new trout and seeing if I was up for the challenge. Each guide I fished with had a bit different take on the fishing, from the way they approached spotted fish, to flies used, to how to strike a fish that has taken a dry fly – I loved this, as I got to learn each guide's secrets and put them into the vault for the future.



The preferred fishing gear was virtually identical at Owen River as at Riverview – the guides all have individual preferences in flies, but everything else remained the same. Owen River Lodge has a mud room *filled* with an over- the- top selection of high-end Simms waders and boots – enough to outfit a full lodge, with every size of men’s and women’s waders and boots imaginable. Interestingly, the streams in this area do have more slime on their rocks, so Felix has aluminum star cleats on all his boots – he says these do *not* make a lot of noise and spook fish, though he recommends against carbide studs as they are noisy. He has wading staffs for loan, and they all have rubber boot tips. And with an equal amount of Sage outfits to put into the hands of people, there is really no need for most people to bring any gear at all, a highly attractive selling point for many traveling anglers. It is worth noting that both lodges do a lot of wet wading, and provide neoprene gaiter socks for anglers wishing to do so – guests just need to bring their own quick-dry wading pants. Owen River also has a small shop in the fun room with appropriate rods/reels/lines and flies, as well as leaders and flies and other basic gear, for those wishing to purchase their own. Honestly, the fishing here is so simplistic from a tackle standpoint, most people will just let the guide provide everything needed...I didn’t even bother wearing a hip back on any of my fishing days. I was surprised that all the guides at both lodges use Maxima Ultragreen or Clear almost to the exclusion of all else. They put a heavier tapered mono leader (9’ 2X or 3X) on a guests outfit, and then add Maxima 4 pound or 5 pound tippet as needed, for either nymphs and indicators, or dry flies. I asked about using fluorocarbon, but universally they do not like the way it knots, either to itself or mono. Plus you are always fighting large fish around big rocks, and nothing beats Maxima for abrasion resistance. A nice touch at Owen River is that Felix gives all the guides a digital camera, with which they take shots of the client daily; at trips end he hands each client a thumb drive with a bunch of memories from their stay – people love it!



Breakfasts at Owen River Lodge were virtually the same as at Riverview, also cooked to order. They normally have a sous chef that does the breakfasts, and they are wonderful. Lunches were also the same as at Riverview – homemade sandwiches on great bread with delicious meats, and desserts. I also suggested they put chips in with the lunches. Dinners were memorable – they have two remarkable chefs on staff that take turns, and they are clearly well-trained and proud of their presentations. Every evening the chef would come out and announce/describe the 3-course meal, then again when the incredible desserts were brought out. These meals were just amazing, as good as what you find at a top-end restaurant in a big city; clearly, this part of the package is important to Felix, and it shows. It was nice, too, that virtually all the greens, herbs, and vegetables came from the lodge's gardens.

What makes Owen River Lodge so unique and special?

- Owen River Lodge fishing is centered on drive-to fishing, and Felix and his guides have two dozen different streams within 90 minutes drive of the lodge. You will fish an amazing diversity of water during your stay. Heli fishing can certainly also be arranged, and there are some streams here with huge brown trout that cannot be reached any other way, yet you will normally enjoy short drives to big trout each day, in some of the most spectacular country on the South Island.
- One of the most comfortable fly fishing lodges on the South Island, owner Felix Borenstein has spared no expense in making his accommodations luxurious, and the food, 5-star. The private cottage suites are in beautiful natural gardens overlooking Owen River itself, so your non-fishing hours are spent in the lap of luxury, and you will be amazed at the quality and ingenuity of the lodge's daily menu.
- For non-anglers, Owen River Lodge has many options, from horseback riding on the ranch to taking wine tours in nearby vineyards, to shopping in nearby Nelson and Murchison, to white water boating. This area is a hub of outdoor tourism, and a great place to put together a fishing/tourist combo trip.
- Owen River Lodge is fine taking guests for less than a full week trip. So if you want to tag a few days fishing to the end of a business or tourist trip, they are an ideal choice. No need to commit to the cost of a full weeklong trip, if that is not what you're looking for.
- Owen River Lodge lodge has free loaner gear – waders and shoes, and rods and reels. For those not wanting to pack their own gear all the way to New Zealand – or not wanting to purchase the specialty-colored fly lines or non-felt-soled wading shoes required - this can be an attractive option.

Coming home was easy. On March 12, Felix drove me 90 minutes to Nelson where I caught an afternoon flight to Auckland, then a 12-hour grind overnight back to San Francisco, then a 20-minute jump to Sacramento, arriving the same day (the 12th) that I left (payback from the lost International Dateline days on the way down).

A couple of important things to keep in mind about these two lodges, and fishing in New Zealand in general:

These trips represent a tremendous value in the world of world-class fly fishing destinations. Consider that a full week at the finest New Zealand lodges available is running in the range of \$8000NZ...which at the current exchange rate translates into *only \$5400 in US dollars!* That is an incredible value.



These lodges provide very high service and accommodations, the things many traveling anglers appreciate. The most discerning anglers will be pleased with that part of the package here.

While both lodges are more than happy to arrange for helicopter access fishing (typically adds \$1,000-\$2000/day to the price tag), their drive-to fishing is so good you don't need to fly. Many people add one day of flying to their itineraries just because it is such a breathtaking flight, and in general the streams accessed are so remote the fish get almost no pressure, so are more aggressive and easier to catch.

In order to fish well in New Zealand, anglers are going to need to be able to walk a lot, often on river-bottom cobble. There *are* places the guides can take guests who are physically unable to walk more than several hundred yards in a day, but typically it will affect the fishing. But on most days guides will have guests

walking and fishing 1-3 miles along streambanks in order to get continuous shots at big trout – remember, most of these streams only have 20-50 trout per river mile. And the more mobile the client, the more likely they are to reach water that gets little pressure, always a good thing...guides love to get “walkers”, for just this reason.

People often call me who are afraid to book New Zealand because they have heard how far you have to cast to catch fish, and they feel inadequate. In fact, long casts are not needed here – the guides will always get you as close to the fish as possible to increase the odds of you getting an accurate, drag-free drift. I would say that virtually all my fish were hooked in a casting range of 20-40 feet, with a couple hooked at about 15 feet! You always approach and cast to these fish from a position directly downstream of them to avoid them knowing you are there... and you can often get pretty close. The key is to be very accurate at these modest lengths. Good practice would be to put dinner plates on your backyard at 20,30, and 40 feet, and practice laying your “fly” right onto them, using a 15-foot leader. This practice will prove invaluable for real life fishing situations in New Zealand.

We have all heard how fanatical the New Zealand guides are about using drab lines and wearing earth-tone clothing...trust me, this is for good reason! These big browns are preternaturally aware of their surroundings, and will see any slight flash or unnatural profile. As usual, one should trust the guides.

I was there in March in a historic drought season – though I experienced excellent fishing, it is true that the big browns had been fished over for four months, and didn't have a lot of water over their backs, making

them more challenging than normal. If people can travel in December, the fish are still a bit naïve and happy all the time, and are much easier to catch. January is nearly as good, and February is also a pretty solid fishing month (and in fact is normally the most popular month to travel to fish in New Zealand). November can be exceptionally good, but the odds of hitting high water will be a bit too risky for a lot of people. April can actually be as good as March, as most lodges don't have many clients, so the fish are getting happy again...but the weather is getting colder and the chance of getting blow-out rains increases.

For people not wanting to bring their own gear – waders, wading boots, rods/reels/lines/flyes – both lodges will provide everything at no extra charge...this is pretty common in New Zealand.

The lodges can arrange - for a fee - to have drivers transfer guests between the nearest airport city and their lodges. If guests prefer to rent a car and drive themselves, they need to remember they drive on the “wrong” side of the road down there. For driving in the country this is an easy transition, but in congested city traffic, it can be challenging and a bit unnerving.

All in all, I found these two lodges to be exceptionally well-operated, and both offered such great variety in their fishing programs. There definitely are differences in the two destinations, and I encourage you to give me a call or drop an email to discuss those, if you are starting to plan a trip to the amazing South Island of New Zealand!

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