



Guide Jean shows a good reason to visit this area – a 23 lb brown.



Sea Trout Quest

Tomas Kucera travels in search of the world's biggest sea-runners.

Patagonia at last. I had heard a lot of stories about the wind, the cold, and the tough conditions; now it was time to find out. Was I ready? Had I brought adequate clothing and enough fishing gear? What is it really like?

As the plane circles the Rio Gallegos, heading for the air strip on the other side, the estuary looks rough and blown apart, the landscape barren. A glance around the plane confirms it; everyone is adding layers, and their clothing looks substantial. The plane lands and I am as far south as I have ever been.

The hour-long drive along the river is passed chatting with Gaston, head guide at the lodge and a local from this town. He has been involved in a government study on the sea run browns of the Rio Gallegos and has



Fiery sunset on a perfect Patagonian evening.

guided for many years on this river. My appetite is more than whetted.

Arriving at the lodge is a pleasant affair and a chance to meet the staff, enjoy some refreshments, unpack, set up the fishing gear and get ready for the afternoon fishing session starting at 4 p.m.

I rig up my single handed 8-weight Loomis with a 275 grain sink-tip line and a sectioned leader tapering down

to 15 lb fluorocarbon. Yes, this is for trout fishing, but surely it is overkill! What trout would bite on 15 lb tippet and put more than a slight bend in an 8-weight?

RIO GALLEGOS

The next surprise comes at the river as I realise I am seriously under-gunned. How can anyone cast in this wind, even with an 8-weight? Gaston has the answer as he takes a 14-foot double handed Spey rod from the vehicle rack and suggests we fish with this as the wind is "up a little" and the water is high and has some colour.

Never argue with the guide I say, so an interesting afternoon is spent learning to cast a double hander. Gaston assures me I am learning well; I'm not so sure. Right on dark, fishing a very fast and rocky run called Abbots, a



It is hard to get a good photo as she is so big and squirms and wriggles. Nacho shows me how to hold the fish and I get a shot of him.

The afternoon session provides the opportunity to get further acquainted with the river, catching some resident fish on the Leech, losing a sea runner, and plenty more casting practice with the two-handed rod. The evening is pleasantly spent in front of the fire sipping various beverages and chatting about fishing. Fernando is surprisingly nice about the fish I have caught in his pool, as he has flown in especially to fish it the next morning. The word poacher is only used once.

The next morning it is incredible to look outside and see blue sky and very little wind. Gaston, Carlos and I set off for the morning session. Even though it is still, the air is biting cold. Both Carlos and I fish single-handed rods, the water is a lot clearer this morning and our hopes are high. Carlos

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huge fish rolls, about where my fly might have been. Hmmm.

Looking out of the window next morning towards the river, I notice that the trees are trimmed to the height of the fence protecting them from the wind, and other older trees have no branches on one side. So that's the prevailing wind direction, and it does blow hard!

The morning session starts shortly after breakfast and I am fishing with Nacho today. Nacho proves to be one of the best guides you could hope to fish with. Although the river is dropping rapidly I follow his suggestion to "fish the big rod." By mid-morning this monster rod is starting to feel like the perfect weapon for these conditions, and with the long butt tucked under the right arm while retrieving the fly with the left, I am starting to feel as though I am seriously fishing this inspiring piece of water.

Nacho had drawn the pool on the chalkboard for my benefit prior to the start of fishing, and I know that I have fished the best part of the run and covered the channel and hot spots where any sea runners should be. I am coming to the end of Fernandos, the pool named after the estancia owner with private fishing rights to approximately 55 km of water on the Rio

Gallegos. The owner is due to visit the lodge that evening with his friend Carlos. Is it good etiquette to be fishing in his personal pool?

FIRST SEA TROUT

Suddenly there is a pull on the line, I lift the huge rod, but only a little way as it is pulled back down by something on the other end. I am surprised; the large articulated chartreuse Leech fly I have been throwing has actually drawn a response. Yes it is definitely a fish; the rod is bent over and throbbing. Nacho comes over with a giant net and calmly states that I have hooked a sea trout.

The big rod helps with the sudden lunges and headshakes as the diesel I have hooked casually makes its way upstream. I am thankful for the 15 lb tippet. I start thinking of what it would be like to hook this thing on a 9-ft single-handed rod; my brain quivers and I get on with the task at hand. The fight draws down, the colour in the water makes netting difficult, but suddenly, there it is in the net. I cannot believe what I am looking at. The bottom of the net is full, the fish looks incredible: a silvery hen with a small head, a fresh-run fish on her way upriver to spawn. Nacho weighs the fish and I measure it—20 lb and 86 cm.



Releasing a spring creek resident.

pulls out of a large fish in the first few casts. I am having problems; the water coming off the stripped line is freezing on contact with the tape on my fingers and falling off as ice. It isn't long before I have to take a break from casting. Gaston brings me a coffee and the feeling returns to my hand with an incredible pins-and-needles type pain.

The beautiful day is warming and I am back in action. Carlos hooks and lands a 20-pounder. We move to another spot and it isn't long before I am into a fish on the single-handed 8-weight. The fish leaps after the take and my heart starts to thump; the rod is jumping around in my hand and although there is not the fast, sustained run of a bonefish this fight is incredible. The fish is a beautiful 76 cm hen with a little colour; Gaston says she has been in the river for over a month.

SPRING CREEK

We retire for lunch and siesta. I choose to fish the Rio Gallegos Chico for the early afternoon, a small spring creek on the property with over 30 km of water as the bird flies and a lot more on the ground as it twists and braids its way through the valley. This choice turns out to be a good one as after a half-hour drive Gaston and I are greeted by one of the most perfect trout habitats I have seen. The water is crystal clear, with abundant weed growth, deep holes and undercut banks. The braid we are fishing is about 15 feet wide. The next two hours pass like a dream as trout after trout is polaroided and comes up to the Chernobyl Ant on 8 lb fluorocarbon on the 6-weight. Some see me and spook, others are missed. The action is incredible.

As the light drops the fish come up out of the deeper holes and move into shallow feeding lies. Now I am spooking a lot of fish and realise I can no longer see into the water. Time to head back to the main river for the 'magic hour'.

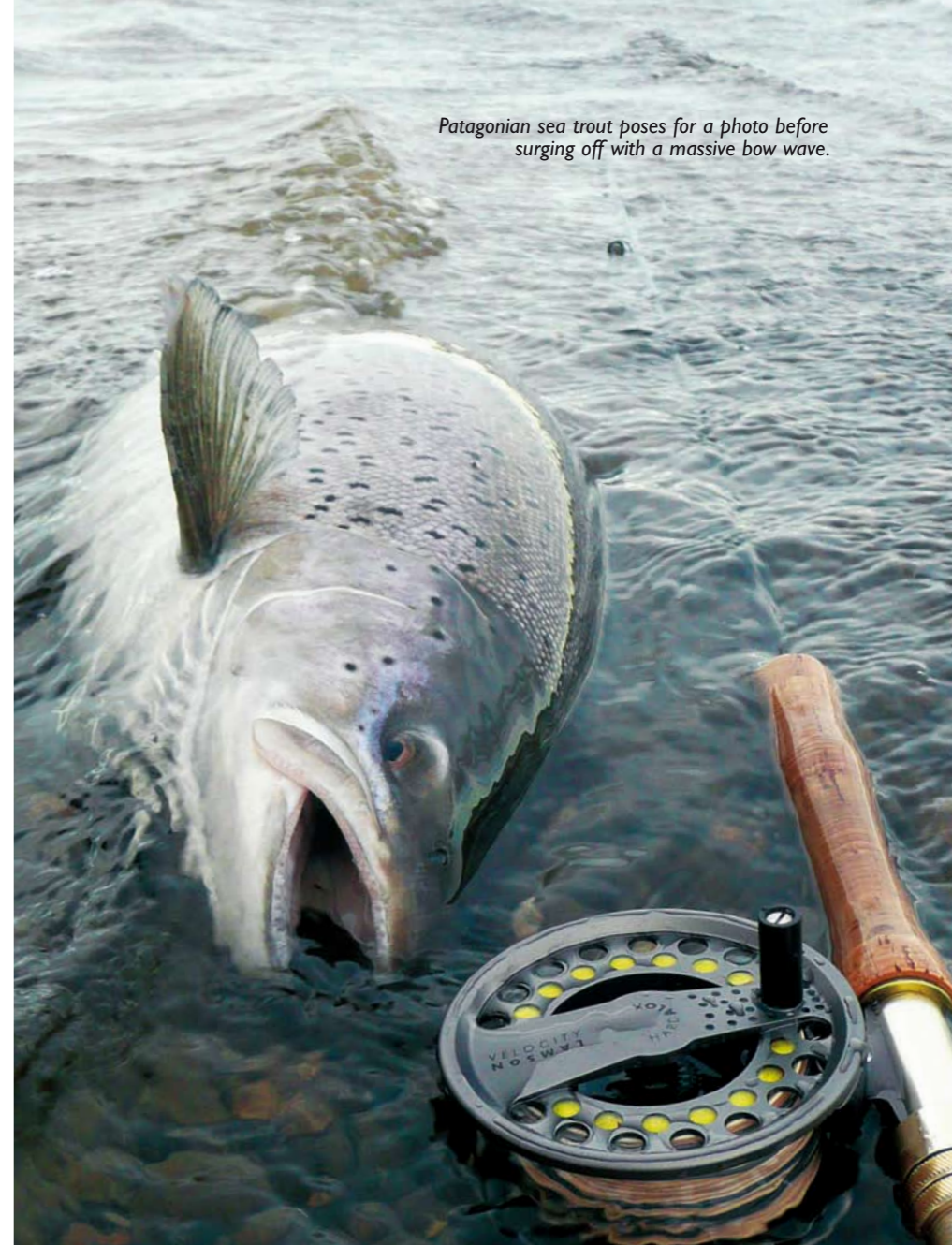
We position ourselves just as it is getting dark and I start to fish the run. The fly is getting deep and bumping some boulders on the bottom, occasionally catching a bit of weed on this side of the channel. I am working slowly down towards the hot spot when the fly snags on the bottom. I pull on the rod, and then I pull on the rod a couple more times to try to



A fly fishing moment — a fish on the big rod.

free the fly. Then the rod pulses in my hand. What have I hooked?

The fish takes off downstream against serious drag, rolls about 50 metres down and is gone. Gaston says it is most likely a very big male fish—the living rock?



Patagonian sea trout poses for a photo before surging off with a massive bow wave.

A 14-POUNDER HOOKED IN THE TAIL OF A POOL AND LANDED 250 METRES DOWNSTREAM. FOUR FISH TAKEN IN THE AFTERNOON SESSION, THE BIGGEST WEIGHING 23 LB.

PERFECTION

The last day on the Rio Gallegos (pronounced Rio Gaa-shaegos) heralds a beautiful morning and the wind is up. Nacho and I hit the river. I am making beautiful long casts into all the right places with the single-handed rod and feeling good. Nacho is entertaining himself making signs on the iced-up little puddles and taking photos of me through bits of ice as I am casting. We move to the next run—Meteorite—named after a boulder embedded in the hill on the opposite bank. The hot

spot is opposite the boulder and sure enough a lovely 67 cm, 10 lb silver fish comes to the fly and is landed.

The first part of the afternoon is spent at the spring creek and I land nine fish on the Chernobyl Ant. One of them tail walks right up on the bank. I quickly kick him back before the prickly grass hurts his eyes, and continue the fight. The little net is 20 inches and he is curled up in it. I have never had such fast fishing to such beautiful trout. The camera does not truly capture the deep ruby colouration of these fish.

Is this heaven? In Patagonia and hooked up to another massive sea-run brown.



Sea Trout Quest... continued



Cradling the sea trout of my dreams.

My time on the Rio Gallegos Chico ends with the sun dropping too low to see into the water. Nacho and I head to the main river for the magic hour. Nacho is keen for me to try for the living rock fish of the previous night but my heart is not in it and the run ends quickly. I am keen to fish Abbots to finish my unsettled business from the very first night, and four casts into the run I bring a 67 cm fish to the net,

right about where that one rolled on the first night. Nacho encourages me to fish out the run but I finish the day there, perfect in my mind: ten trout for the afternoon, finishing with a 10-pounder on the last cast at Abbots.

My time at this lodge has been fantastic and I feel like the king of the world. Muchos gracias Fernando.

TIERRA DEL FUEGO

The next stage of my sea trout journey involves travelling to the island at the southernmost tip of South America. Tierra del Fuego, the land of fire, named for its sunrises and sunsets and home of the Rio Grande, classed as the number one sea-trout river in the world. The transfer is 10 hours by land and includes four border crossings and a barge over the Magellan Strait. The barge is running this day, as it isn't too windy, although it is hard to stand up in wind blowing at about 85 kph!

The country is a lot wetter and greener once we are on the island, and as we drive across another spring creek on the Chilean side of the border I can't help wondering if all these creeks have fish, though getting a fly onto them in this wind would be a challenge.

Finally I am at the quintessential fly fishing lodge. I enjoy the stone fireplace, meeting all the guests, taking in the wooden beams and exposed timbers. There is time to unpack and to rig up for the next day.

My time here passes in a flash. A 14-pounder hooked in the tail of a pool and landed 250 metres downstream. Four fish taken in the afternoon session, the biggest weighing 23 lb.

Memorable too is the 12-pounder hooked on the very first cast of the last morning, having tried to get the fly onto the water by using three false casts directly into the wind up the bank, then releasing on the back cast towards the water. Actually landing a



I wondered why the nets were so big!

backwards cast on the river behind me in a 60-kph wind with a 275-grain sink-tip is remarkable. Then, dead drifting, I feel a pluck and hook up on a very bright 9 lb fish despite a large belly in the line.

"That's it for me." My hands are too cold to cast again after the release. Then five minutes later, not 20 feet upstream where a fish has risen, I make another cast and catch a lovely 5-pounder, finishing the day with two fish in the last two casts.

South America—incredible lodges, wholesome produce turned into tasty meals, not to mention catch-and-release fly fishing that creates lifelong memories. **FI**

To arrange your fly fishing trip of a lifetime email tomas@travellingflyfisher.com.au or phone 0458 239 542.